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# The Clinical Significance of Companion Animals for LGBT+ Youth: Unconditional Love in a Straight Society

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# The Clinical Significance of Companion Animals for LGBT+ Youth: Unconditional Love in a Straight Society

## **Abstract**

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### **Unconditional Love in a Straight Society**

## **Abstract**

**Background:** Research continues on LGBT+ youth, social isolation, and mental health. Prior studies have shown the linkage between lack of social support and unhealthy outcomes including depression, substance use, and suicidal ideation. In place of or in addition to human support, companion animal relationships for this marginalized population have not been studied through previous work. This qualitative study explored the experiences of LGBT+ youth who have used companion animals for social and emotional support as a twinship selfobject or attachment object using Self Psychology and Attachment Theory as a clinical lens.

**Methods:** Ten self-identified LGBT+ youth aged eighteen to twenty-five were interviewed privately at two sites in the spring of 2017.

**Results:** Participants were sought through convenience and snowball sampling. Key interview findings included 1) social marginalization based on sexual orientation and gender identity with heterosexism are a pervasive part of society 2) the unconditional love and acceptance from companion animals exists through both verbal and physical communication 3) personal, academic, and professional growth for participants is attributed to pet ownership during their time of sexual development.

**Discussion:** Findings showed that companion animals fulfilled multiple purposes for the participants in this study during their adolescence. This connection merits further quantitative and qualitative research into the clinical significance of companion animals for this population.

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## **Second Advisor**

Linda A. Hawkins

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Unconditional Love in a Straight Society

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**The Clinical Significance of Companion Animals for LGBT+ Youth:  
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### **Terminological notes**

To clarify several concepts in this dissertation, I offer definitions of two terms. I use the term LGBT+ to encompass lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other non-conforming gender identities beyond the binaries of male or female. Much contemporary research on this similar population refers to LGBTQ (for queer or questioning) or added acronyms for various characteristics of gender fluidity to include asexuality or poly-sexuality. While I find value in specific definitions in many contexts, my aim on using LGBT+ is to decrease confusion and to not limit the characteristics of my participants to a specific variable rather than sexual minority. Heterosexism is used to define the societal expectation that one is straight and thus engages in opposite sex romantic relationships. Cisgender refers to a person who identifies as the gender that matches their physical sex at birth.

I also use the term companion animals in place of pets or other non-service animals in one's household or farm if applicable. The empirical research element of this dissertation does not examine animal-assisted therapy but rather non-formal animal relationships with youth. Through qualitative interviews, I am further narrowing youth experiences to those with non-service animals in their own family household or current dwelling in order to code more similar themes and subjects rather than with distant companion animals that resided in another home.

A common theme for LGBT+ youth as they develop into adults is that of social isolation associated with homophobia or transphobia in multiple contexts. Eighty percent of LGBT students reported being harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender identity with fifty percent of respondents reported having heard homophobic or transphobic comments from school staff (Bratsis, 2015). Numerous studies have addressed the concepts of Attachment Theory and

Self Psychology as applied to LGBT+ youth and adults (Closs, 2010; Feathergill, 1994; Greene, Fisher, Kuper, Andrews, & Mustanski, 2014; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Shilo & Savaya, 2011).

Other research closely examines humans forming attachment bonds with companion animals and the use of animal assisted therapy. I have sought to study the significance of LGBT+ youth's attachment to companion animals in the absence of familial and/or community support based on the youth's developing sexual orientation or sexual identity. I have not been able to locate any existing research specific to this topic and instead have grouped research and scholarly articles based upon core aspects of my proposal: Homophobia or Transphobia & Impact on LGBT+ Youth, LGBT+ Attachment, and Companion Animal Attachment. As these themes have not been linked together in an empirical study previously, I include these concepts in this section on terminological notes; these themes guided my research and each term will be further defined for the reader. My literature review begins with an overall examination of preliminary articles that support my proposal from these different perspectives but ultimately comprise a multifaceted overview for my study.

## **Chapter 1: Homophobia or Transphobia & Impact on LGBT+ Youth**

Numerous researchers have studied homophobia and heterosexism in society and their impact on sexual minority youth (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Bratsis, 2015; D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005; Hatzenbuehler, Duncan, & Johnson, 2015; McDermott, Scourfield, & Roen, 2008; Olson, Durwood, Demeules, & McLaughlin, 2016; Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Snapp, Watson, Russell, Diaz, & Ryan, 2015). A commonality among the participants in my study is their sexual minority status within a heterosexual and cisgender society. Almeida et al. (2009) researched LGBT youth in Boston and the results showed that LGBT adolescents were much more likely to report perceived discrimination on the basis of their sexual minority status.

The perceived discrimination often leads to depression as reported in this research. Gay boys in particular reported the highest levels of depression among LGBT respondents and also demonstrated the greatest likelihood of self-harm (Almeida et al., 2009). The authors hypothesize that males face different societal sexual pressure than females yet do not address why gay males report this higher incidence of depression as compared to transgendered youth. This large scale study within the Boston public school system sought ethnically and racially diverse subjects to produce findings that could be generalized to other regions and contexts. The empirical research component of my dissertation also seeks to elicit diverse voices based on race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. As a gay man of color, I particularly note the findings on depression among gay males in an urban environment within this study as deserving of further examination.

Hatzenbuehler, Duncan, and Johnson (2015) also conducted a study in the Boston school system and found that LGBT youth are disproportionately higher targets of bullying and peer victimization than their straight counterparts. From a sample of 1878 public school students, the findings suggest that "sexual minority youths who reported relational bullying were significantly more likely to reside in neighborhoods with higher LGBT assault hate crime rates" (p.668). High hate crime rates were specific to LGBT assaults and not related to a neighborhood's overall violent crime prevalence; this suggests that LGBT bullying is not merely an after effect of general crime. The findings from these two Massachusetts based studies (Almeida et al., 2009; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2015) both present a view on the societal pressures placed on LGBT+ youth in their schools and urban communities. Heterosexism continues as a guiding force in society despite historical progress made on LGBT+ rights and equality. The ability to be open about ones sexual identity or gender identity has indeed become more common in today's society but not every region, community, or family is equally accepting for LGBT+ youth. These studies focused on one of the most socially liberal areas of the United States yet still reflect sexual minority status as a significant stressor and an isolating factor for adolescents.

Data on homophobia and its impact on LGBT+ suicide attempts further illustrate the impact of heterosexist beliefs on LGBT+ youth. In a qualitative study by McDermott, Scourfield, and Roen (2008), LGBT shame is linked with self-destructive behaviors including suicide. Homophobia serves to punish LGBT youth as abnormal, shameful, or devious based on their sexual orientation or sexual identity (Almeida et al., 2009; Bratsis, 2015; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2015; McDermott et al., 2008). The researchers cite a statistic that LGBT youth attempt suicide at over 400% the rate of their heterosexual counterparts (McDermott et al., 2008). Another recent study reported that nine percent of transgender youth have actually attempted suicide by age 15

with thirty percent attempting suicide by age 19, and a full forty-one percent of transgender adults having had attempted suicide in their lifetime (Turban, Ferraiolo, Martin & Olezeski,, 2017). Societal transphobia is hypothesized as the cause for this stark difference with increased substance use, unsafe sex, and self-harm as coping strategies also being linked to this cause. Participants in the McDermott et al. study reported severe social isolation due to family rejection and the inability to find safe places in which to form same-sex relationships. The majority of interviewees define the label of "gay" as a term of abuse that is perpetuated by homophobic behavior from others; demonstrating any characteristics associated with the opposite sex can bring even more ridicule and marginalization. Examples included males who acted femininely or females who exuded societally defined male characteristics in their behavior or dress. Several subjects identify as having to become adults prematurely as no idealized parental figure existed. The interviewees in the McDermott et al. study noted that their parents were not supportive of their sexuality. This finding did not surprise me as homophobia is often simply an accepted part of society. Limitations of this study were that all participants were white, from suburban communities in the United Kingdom and were current participants in support groups. This British study clearly illuminated the connection of homophobic attitudes and family rejection. However the themes of social isolation and LGBT oppression are clearly reported as in the former Boston studies (Almeida et al., 2009; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2015) and lead me to additional more comprehensive examination of the experiences of growing up as a marginalized sexual minority member.

Expanding on social isolation from communities and peers, family acceptance composes perhaps the most important aspect for sexually questioning and developing LGBT+ youth (D'Augelli et al., 2005; Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Snapp et al., 2015). For youth living with a lack

of familial support for their sexual identity or orientation, feelings of isolation can grow from a constant immersion of non-acceptance and hostility. A marginalized youth may be able to find refuge from peer or school based homophobia, but that may not be possible when the discrimination is based in one's home. For comparison, I turned to an Israeli cross-sectional quantitative study of 461 LGB adolescents and young adults (Shilo & Savaya, 2011) which examined the positive correlation between other's acceptance and support of sexual orientation and self-acceptance. As this dissertation examines the potential commonality of themes of support that transcends cultures and in fact species, the large scale data from a foreign study helped to expand my understanding of family acceptance.

Shilo and Savaya found that family acceptance produced much higher rates of self-acceptance among LGB youth as opposed to similar acceptance from friends. However social support from friends did positively yield higher rates of self-disclosure of sexual orientation to others. Perceptions of social support produced differential effects more so than actual actions for many subjects. Shilo and Savaya (2011) suggested that "counselors working with sexual minority youths should focus on interventions that increase support and acceptance from family, friends, and others...."(p.328).

D'Augelli et al. (2005) conducted a longitudinal quantitative study with 15-19 year old LGB subjects in New York City. Family non-acceptance of LGBT+ status (D'Augelli et al., 2005; McDermott et al., 2008; Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Snapp, et al., 2015) demonstrates a negative impact on self identity formation. I note parental support to be of paramount importance in the healthy identity formation for LGBT+ youth. The influence of this theme is stressed in several studies on homophobic conditions for youth and is perhaps the greatest predictor of well-being in the development of LGBT+ youth. Fear of a negative reaction from parents was cited as

the major reason for respondents not to come out regarding their sexual orientation (D'Augelli et al., 2005). Verbal and physical abuse in the forms of derogatory put downs and hitting was also much more likely for LGB youth who were out to their parents than for those whose parents were not yet suspecting of the sexuality for their gender atypical youth who may not have presented in a heterosexist male or female demeanor. Knowing parents also made more antigay comments than did parents of closeted youth who behaved closer to expected cisgender norms. (D'Augelli et al, 2005).

The study also examined internal homophobia or beliefs held by the LGB youth themselves and a perceived lack of social support. D'Augelli et al. (2005) suggested that “(s)ome saw continuing secrecy as their only option.” (p.481). The findings regarding parental non-acceptance and its possible impact on internalized homophobia strengthen the need to further study this phenomenon among LGBT+ youth. Self-hatred based on sexuality can be hypothesized as linked to external homophobia as a correlation exists between negative reaction from others and lower self-esteem (D'Augelli et al., 2005; McDermott et al., 2008; Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Snapp, et al., 2015).

Snapp et al. (2015) studied family acceptance for LGBT young adults in the San Francisco Bay area. As in the studies from D'Augelli et al. (2005) and Shilo and Savaya (2011), Snapp et al. (2015) found that family and parental support comprised the most significant factors of self-acceptance for LGBT youth. The cross-sectional study of Hispanic and non-Hispanic White youth examined positive and negative outcomes from coming out to one's parents and families. LGBT young adults who were rejected by their parents were 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers who experienced family acceptance (Snapp et al., 2015). The same respondents were 5.9 times more likely to be depressed and 3.4 times more likely to use



illegal substances to cope (Snapp et al., 2015). The ethnic differences in the sample produced the finding that Latino LGBT youth were less likely to come out to their parents and hence did not experience the same buffer effect against sexual minority stress that families offer as coping mechanisms. "(F)amily acceptance during the teenage years was the only form of support that significantly predicted all means of young adult adjustment" (p.426).

Snapp et al.'s study also looked at peer support in comparison to family support for respondents. The higher number of supportive friends for an LGBT youth did result in higher levels of reported self-esteem, though less significantly than family support. The authors suggested that enhancing supportive networks for LGBT youth at risk for suicide is a low cost strategy for long-term health and well-being. Creating suggestions for building a supportive network is one of the motivating factors for my dissertation.

Regarding familial heterosexism or the expectation from within a family of heterosexual cisgender identity for children, a mixed method study from the Pacific Northwest produced findings on family acceptance and well-being specific to transgender youth. Transgender mental and physical health have become topics of professional concern but until recently relatively few studies expressly captured this population's concern for mental well-being. Olson, Durwood, Demueles, and McLaughlin (2016) studied parental acceptance and the influence on positive mental health outcomes to address a critical gap in professional knowledge. Socially transgender prepubescent children who had not undergone any biological or hormonal transitional therapy were invited to participate in this quantitative and qualitative study with their cisgender siblings as a control group. The parents were also included and completed measures of depression and anxiety regarding their socially transgender child. The findings suggested that family support is associated with better mental health for transgendered children. Simply being transgender does

not mean that a child will experience psychopathology. Cited results were that supported transgender children showed no increase in depression as opposed to cisgender siblings and only a slightly increased level of anxiety (Olson et al., 2016). The findings suggest that perhaps transphobia and assumptions about a transgender youth's level of sexual identity confusion serve to limit external social support. Transgender children in the study did not report high levels of gender confusion or anxiety suggesting that parental guidance during development is merited as in any parent-child relationship (Olson et al., 2016). These findings (Olson et al., 2016) reported parental participation and support as being key to the emotional well-being of transgendered youth and echoed sentiments of the importance of parental acceptance for the overall LGBT+ youth population (D'Augelli et al., 2005; Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Snapp et al., 2015).

Regarding public images of LGBT+ lives often dominated by death and negativity, Gordon (2016) noted the suicides of Tyler Clementi, the gay Rutgers student who took his life in 2010, and Leelah Alcorn, a transgender teenager whose suicide in 2014 was also accompanied by extensive media coverage. Gordon (2016) wrote that their public suicides "haunt the margin of LGBT life and therefore LGBT representation" (p.1278). The negative connections of LGBT+ status with dire consequences such as suicide, discrimination, or hate crimes pervade in many media portrayals in a homophobic society. I wondered how these public accounts impacted self-image for LGBT+ youth and wanted to pursue this further in my research.

A social work genogram for LGBT+ youth must include families, peers, schools, and communities as interdependent factors regarding real and potential social support. My desire in this dissertation is to explore how these social networks have been expanded by some to include non-human participants. Bowlby (1973, 1979, 1982, 1988) initially wrote about Attachment Theory as it pertained to the formation and quality of attachments formed by children to other

people. In the absence of human support due to homophobia, transphobia, and stigmatization, I wanted to hear how LGBT+ youth may have turned to attachments with companion animals.

## **Chapter 2: Attachments and Self Psychology**

### **LGBT+ Attachment**

Unique characteristics to LGBT+ youth development demonstrate the added stressors of sexual minority status in a heterosexist context. Not conforming to the expectation of having opposite sex attractions and relationships or identifying as a different gender than one's birth sex are both stressors not endured by heterosexual cisgender youth. The attachment style for LGBT+ youth composes the second pillar of my study and serves as the subject of several key studies in recent years as historically little data has existed specific to LGBT+ youth and their attachment patterns. Several studies have highlighted aspects specific to LGBT+ attachment as opposed to heterosexual adolescent attachments. The first of which, by Mohr and Fassinger (2003), examined the relationship of attachment and security with the LGB (this study from thirteen years ago did not include transgender subjects) experience of self- acceptance in the context of a homophobic environment. At that time, relatively few studies were inclusive of the transgender experience as most were focused on sexual orientation. Their quantitative cross-sectional study looked at:

- 1) Child to parent attachment
- 2) The real or perceived degree of support from parents regarding being an LGB youth
- 3) General attachment patterns in terms of anxiety or avoidance specifically with LGB life -variables in place. These variables include same-sex relationship attachments and potentially avoidant situations for closeted respondents.

The authors referred to Bowlby's Attachment Theory and emphasized that people have a need to seek and form attachments to others to serve as buffers against threats; the threats resulting from the LGB coming out experience include rejection and harm from potential supports as well as from strangers. The obtained responses suggested that coming to terms with being LGB is influenced both by internal and external homophobia and by an individual's attachment style. While 85% of the participants identified as white, the researchers attempted to promote diversity in their sample by heavily recruiting at Black Gay Pride events. Only subjects open about their sexuality and in same-sex relationships were included in this study and based on the cross-sectional data used, it is not possible to truly identify the exact role of attachment style in LGB identity formation. I also note that race should not only be a demographic category but included in an intersectional analysis of participants; LGBT+ youth may certainly have intersecting multiple minority statuses in addition to sexual orientation or gender identity. However despite this and the date of the study, the findings suggested the use of attachments for a limited population of LGB youth as protective factors during sexual development against potential homophobic reactions which is a theme echoed in the following cited research.

Building upon this theme, with the addition of gender identity, Greene et al. (2014) studied LGBT attachment in peer and sexual relationships through a mixed method longitudinal study. Contrary to the prior cited study by Mohr and Fassinger (2003), transgendered subjects participated in this research on relationships. Midwestern LGBT young adults cited peer relationships as well as romantic relationships as buffering agents against discrimination. Through the qualitative segment of the study, LGBT respondents reported a lack of role models of same sex relationships in both reality and in media, with several participants reporting having to turn to opposite sex couples for modeling. Some respondents also cited online support, like

Facebook, to be of some help in buffering against heterosexism and providing examples of same sex relationships (Greene et al., 2014). Cyber support was noted as helpful due to its increasing popularity among youth and accessibility for socially isolated youth. Online support networks are invaluable to socially isolated LGBT+ youth in particular who live in rural areas or do not have access to in person support. However, I question if a lack of physical contact or the anonymity of cyber contact comprises the best support that can be offered. This study also reports the common theme of social support through peer attachment while highlighting the possible difficulties in locating potential attachment figures. From a self psychology perspective, Martinez (2003) addressed these same specific difficulties for LGBT+ people in receiving social support in the form of twinship selfobjects. In Self Psychology, youth turn to selfobjects in order to develop healthy self narcissism (Kohut, 1985). The twinship selfobject can be compared to a locating a peer relationship in order to help develop into adulthood. Empathic traumatic failure can be drawn from the absence of peer twinship responses or a rejecting response from a potential twinship selfobject (Martinez, 2003). A young LGBT+ person receives negative reactions in varying degrees in a heterosexist society. My study offers another alternative view as to how LGBT+ youth are able to locate attachment or selfobjects through non-human forms.

For a final study in this review on LGBT+ attachment as a theme, I include the research of Cynthia Closs (2010) in her Penn DSW dissertation. Closs (2010) utilized a qualitative study to examine the attachment to partners for young gay black men in Philadelphia. The study refers to subjects as queer as their uniting characteristic. This term is used sparingly in academic arenas due to the loaded connotations of the word for many, but Closs provided a clear rationale of the term as describing sexual minority status. Using Bowlby's Attachment Theory as a guide, Closs stated that queer young black men do not receive adequate societal support regarding sexual

identity and relationships. She designed and conducted a qualitative study consisting of interviews with 14 black men who identified as either gay or bisexual. The research looked at attachment bonds forged by participants outside of their families of origin as family homophobia had to be managed and overcome with help outside of the home. Erikson's eight stages of human development (Erikson, 1980) are applied to this study and of note are the responses from the subjects regarding their self-image with external forces at play. Homophobic slurs or derogatory remarks from peers and family had a negative impact on self-image for these gay young men. Like the findings from the Greene et al. (2014) study, Closs (2010) noted that her participants as a whole did not possess ideal models of gay male relationships for which to emulate.

Closs cited Bowlby's Attachment Theory and stated the view that individuals are "attaching forces to persons who are viewed as wise and can provide support, protection, and comfort" (p.28). This similar viewpoint on attachment objects pervades numerous pieces of literature in this overall review. Closs provided ample historical background for external homophobia in society and the qualitative interviews suggest numerous young men exhibit internal homophobia as they seek to rationalize discrimination based on their sexual orientation. The attachment objects studied are the boyfriends of the subjects and the interviews offer in-depth insight into the subjects' views on their same-sex relationships and the formation of their own adult identities.

The commonalities from these studies on LGBT+ attachment suggest the benefits of a buffering effect against homophobic societal influences while reporting difficulties in finding attachment figures. Access to attachment figures may be limited by levels of social isolation, limited support or idealized parental selfobjects for modeling, or ability to obtain cyber based

social assistance (Greene et al., 2014). An expansion of potential attachment figures for LGBT+ youth beyond typical sources is further explored with household animals.

### **Companion Animal Attachment**

The benefits and strengths of human to animal bonds are explored in the remaining literature reviewed for this section. Animals share many characteristics with humans and are often thusly anthropomorphized and become social targets or objects for social interaction (Sevillano & Fiske, 2016). The sub themes of the benefits of animal assisted therapy, general human to animal bonds, and specific attachment to dogs and cats comprise this section. All of the noted sub themes in conjunction build a base to this aspect of my own study.

Practitioners of animal assisted therapies in hospitals, schools, or prisons have noted that animals can bring out individual qualities in people that are often overlooked by other humans (Deaton, 2005; Graham, 2000; Taylor, Fraser, Riggs, 2017). Sevillano and Fiske (2016) noted that different species of animals have stereotypical roles for human interaction, notably a protective stereotype for dogs, cats, and horses with a subordinate stereotype for farm animals, birds, and rabbits. The first cited studies on companion animal attachment share a common theme of examining the human and animal bond in a supportive therapeutic manner. Graham (2000) studied the anthropomorphic benefits of animals through his work with therapies assisted by dolphins, horses, donkeys, ferrets, cats, and dogs. He defined most animal assisted therapy as being active and instrumental while an example of passive therapy would be watching fish in an aquarium for relaxation (Graham, 2000). Active animal assisted therapy "would be expected to have the most benefit for individuals who feel unloved, rejected, socially alienated, or friendless" (p.52). That description suggests a great deal of applicability to LGBT+ youth. Though I have



not completed a study of structured animal assisted therapy in my dissertation, the themes of animal support are further examined in my empirical research.

Graham (2000) further elaborated on the human and animal bond with three points from McNicholas (as cited in Graham, 2000, p.55):

- \* Pets or companion animals are always available and nonjudgmental to humans
- \* No social skills are needed by humans for these relationships
- \* A safe haven or breathing space from human interactions is offered. (p.55)

Working with populations with physical disabilities, Graham (2000) emphasized the strengths of human and animal relationships. Physical touch from a cat to an 8-year-old girl with disfiguring eczema is noted as an example of a unique feature of animal assistance. LGBT+ youth, while certainly not necessarily physically compromised, share some of the same characteristics of someone who may be marginalized and stigmatized by other people as cited in Graham's study (2000). Graham (2000) further noted studies involving AIDS service organizations and the benefits of animal therapy. Through a qualitative interview, a client with HIV described his relationship with animals as follows:

In my room at that time when my life was dark, keeping animals gave me an interest with responsibilities. Holding my pets in my arms allowed me to release pain stored deep inside. Their comforting spirituality somehow enabled me to concentrate on the positive aspects of my life. The walls slowly started to crumble and my existence began to feel worthy again (p. 268).

Human and animal relationships in these types of animal assisted therapeutic programs align on an emotional level with human to companion animal bonding in that both demonstrate the ability of attachments to be formed. Attachment Theory in the traditional sense involving only humans is not the same as attachments between humans and companion animals due to the hierarchal nature of humans as physical caregivers for their animals (Kurdek, 2008, 2009; Rocket & Carr, 2014; Walsh, 2009A, 2009B). However, this attachment is more than simply an emotional bond and Walsh (2009A) stated that the field of mental health has undervalued these attachments when studying clinical benefits in therapy.

Walsh referred to statistics that show the average amount of money spent by individuals in the United States on their pets exceeds the Gross National Product of many nations and that the vast majority of pet owners view their animals as friends or as family members. Owners of companion animals, who have experienced stigma, value the non-judgmental acceptance of an animal that provided calming and physical comfort. I suggest that this finding again connects with LGBT+ youth and experiences with companion animals as sources of stress reduction and possible social support. Studies found that many children viewed companion animals as peers that helped in the development of self-social relations. Children who report having suffered neglect or abuse often develop a closer connection with animals than with human beings. Homophobia and familial non-acceptance of one's sexual orientation or gender identity serve as examples of this noted phenomenon. An animal can help to create a safe space and fulfill physical, emotional, and social needs without threats or disparaging comments. Animal intervention has been used in therapy with adolescents as a source of empathy with non-threatening affection (Walsh, 2009A; Graham, 2000). Serpell wrote that, for these similar reasons, companion animals can show a mediating and lubricating effect with humans in order

for them to elaborate to other humans (Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, eds, 2000). Through the theoretical lens of Self Psychology, I note that this suggests a twinship selfobject fulfillment in the context of homophobia whereby an LGBT+ youth may not have access to adequate human peer support and therefore turns to animal sources. Particularly in regards to Self Psychology, Purewal, Christley, Kordas, Joinson, Meints, Gee, and Westgarth (2017) write that “if companion animals provide support for self-esteem, their greatest influence will be on youth as they approach adolescence (coinciding with increasing experiences of uncertainty) and at this time may have a higher need for the emotional support they derive from companion animals” (p.235).

In the second portion of her article, Walsh (2009B) reported on the benefits of family pets to offer a sense of security for children and to model human relationship events like loss or death. Children with pets often reported less anxiety when moving to a new school or neighborhood and Walsh even calls for the inclusion of companion animals in family genograms. Building on this theme of viewing animals as peers, Walsh cited a quantitative study of 60 families with companion animals with the majority of respondents believing that their pets understood their speech and were sensitive to their moods and emotions, and thusly confided in their animals. I seek to further explore this supportive bond in this dissertation. On an aside regarding therapy, Walsh also made note that Freud's Chinese Chow dog "Jofi" often sat next to clients in therapy sessions to help them relax. This observation extended the comforting use of animals into the therapeutic setting.

Walsh (2009B) quoted the work from Wohlsifer who used his dog in sessions and how the animal often brought a comfort level in the client:

When Sean began to tell his story of childhood sexual abuse he started to sob. My therapy dog, Jake, came over and nuzzled his snout into his face. Sean hugged Jake tightly and continued to tell his story while I sat watching my co-therapist Jake do his work. After Sean, finished his story, I praised him for his strength in sharing his story with me. Sean looked up and said "I didn't tell my story to you; I told it to Jake" (p. 495).

The sense of security and safety from animals studied by Walsh (2009A; 2009B) shares several broad commonalities with the bonds between humans and inanimate selfobjects or objects of attachment. The attachment to animals is not always regulated to organic forms; Freyd, Barlow, Cromer, and Caron (2012) studied college students and women with dissociative identity disorder and referenced their attachments to stuffed as well as live animals. Some subjects used stuffed animals as transitional objects while others used stuffed animals as attachment objects because they could not safely have a live animal. The mixed quantitative and qualitative study reported that regardless of the live or stuffed nature of the animals, subjects reported that they 1) helped to decrease feelings of loneliness 2) served as objects of love, friendship, and attachment and 3) were a source of unconditional love and affection. I sought to explore the ability of the subjects to form bonds to objects that cannot return affection as indicative of innate human nature to form attachments when in need of emotional support. A relationship between a human and animal may be different than that between people and this study serves as a foundation to examine the benefits received by LGBT+ youth in animal relationships in my research.

Brown (2007) examined the usage of companion animals specifically as selfobjects in a qualitative study consisting of semi-structured interviews with twenty four participants. The majority of participants reported several types of selfobject relationships with an attached

animal; the most frequently reported functions were mirroring and twinship fulfillment. Kohut (1985) describes mirroring as a selfobject function that pertains to seeing oneself with grandiosity as an important element in building self-esteem. A lack of rejection was noted by many participants about their animals and remarks that “the animal loved the person more than anyone in the world and accepted them unconditionally” (p.333). Sixty-one percent of the interviews contained references to the twinship selfobject fulfillment from animals with the following excerpt summarizing this phenomenon:

Once again, I could just go back to looking deeply into my eyes, both eyes, you know. If I look at him and he looks at me, he’s looking into my soul, he’s looking into my spirit as a connection there. I can generally expect that he wants to be with me, wants to be my partner and would do anything that he could, you know, to be with me. And I can, oh I don’t know where I’m going here, just like he can read my mind. He can tell if I’m troubled, he can tell if I’m happy. And he can tell if we are going to work and then he’s very happy about that because that’s his big thing...so he seems to be able to tell what’s going on in my mind without me having to say it. (p.338)

Living organisms and expressly dogs have encompassed the greatest amount of study regarding human to companion animal attachment due to physical in addition to mental support. As beloved household pets for millions, dogs will undoubtedly be the selfobject for many in my research. Kurdek (2008) studied the extent to which dogs had features of attachment figure relationships to college students. Through four random samples of 923 American college students, the sample reported that dogs served the task of forming intimacy for them and that dogs were not critical of the human's behavior unlike family members. Using the four features of

attachment figures – secure base, safe haven, proximity maintenance, and separation anxiety (Ainsworth, 1991) -- Kurdek's study served three purposes:

1. to ascertain how dogs related to people as exhibited by these four features.
2. to determine whether differences in perceived levels of closeness to human attachment forms versus pet dogs varied by level of attachment to the dog.
3. to identify global attachment to pet dogs.

Results showed that attachment to dogs is lower than human figures in three of the features. The exception was proximity maintenance which showed attachment to dogs to be equal to that of the respondents to their fathers and siblings (Kurdek, 2008). The college students reported closeness to their dogs as being equal to that of their mothers, siblings, best friends, and significant others while being higher than that of their fathers (Kurdek, 2008). These findings offer the question if companion animals could be used as a buffer against social isolation.

In a follow up study, Kurdek (2009) researched adults rather than college students in quantitative surveys with 975 randomly selected subjects. Subjects in this study included LGBT identified individuals. Kurdek (2009) looked to measure the extent to which dog owners turn to their animals in times of distress with three purposes:

1. to find out what was the relationship between the subjects and their dogs regarding the four features of attachment with particular attention to the possibility of safe haven usage as a buffer against social isolation.
2. to examine the importance of dogs as a safe haven.
3. to learn what variables lead to preference for dogs over human attachment.

Results showed that proximity maintenance was again the highest rated feature of attachment amongst the four features present by Ainsworth (1991) as it was also in Kurdek's prior study (2008). Divorced or widowed people rated their attachments to dogs most highly (Kurdek, 2009). An absence of a significant other possibly explains this result. For LGBT respondents, "people at low levels of self-disclosure (of sexual orientation) were especially likely to prefer dogs over people except partners, who they rated as equivalent" (p. 445). The quantitative studies by Kurdek (2008; 2009) both produce analytic data regarding attachment to dogs that help to develop my guiding questions for research participants as I seek to explore the strength of various attachment features through participant stories though through an interview format.

To expand upon the other attachment features in addition to proximity maintenance to companion animals, I looked to additional research. Still on the theme of attachment to dogs, qualitative interviews with 25 participants in British Columbia comprise the study of people who had recently lost an assistance dog to death or animal retirement (Kwong, Kwong, & Bartholomew, 2011). All of the participants reported their service dog to be a family member and all expressed tremendous grief at their loss. Using Bowlby's Attachment Theory complemented by a caregiving system, Kwong et al. (2011) posed three questions for respondents:

1. Are attachment components of safe haven, secure base, and separation anxiety present in human-dog relationships?
2. What role did caregiving play in the relationship?
3. What were participants' experiences with grief and loss?

Kwong et al. (2011) used both deductive and inductive analyses. Deductively, the authors explored whether attachment concepts were present in the human and animal relationships and codes for safe haven, secure base, and separation anxiety. Inductive analysis addressed subthemes of attachment as well as caregiving and grief processes.

As a safe haven, participants turned to their dogs whenever upset or in times of distress. One respondent offered that "(h)e was my sounding board. I cried on that dog's shoulder more times than I can remember" (p. 426). Also regarding the safe haven feature, another respondent added that "(j)ust by being there, you could literally talk to the dog. Sure, the dog's not going to answer you, but it responds. It'll come up and put its paw on you, or its muzzle....you could talk to the animal, they would understand" (p. 426). Another feature reported by several respondents was that the dogs would seek out their owner when he or she was upset regardless of whether the human sought out the animal. An element of my study seeks to find out if LGBT+ participants speak to their companion animals. I question if in fact LGBT+ youth extoll spoken trust in their animals as they would to a human confidant.

This hypothetical thought gains support from another aspect of this study (Kwong et al., 2011). More than half of the participants reported that they felt a sense of security from their dog, thus fulfilling the feature of a secure base. (Kwong et al., 2011) Multiple respondents reported that their dogs were more open and accepting than people in their lives and provided unconditional support in times of need. One interviewee offered about her dog that "(y)ou knew she was there for you emotionally.....they are always there for you.....I know that they accept me for who I am. I don't have to dress a certain way, or look a certain way, or act a certain way. They love you unconditionally." (p. 427)



Numerous respondents reported a development of self from their bonds with their dog and could elaborate on feelings of separation anxiety when not with their animal. Missing their dogs caused distress in such situations. A respondent stated that "(t)he dog's part of my life and my world and if you can't accept that, then sayonara" (p. 428). Freeform wording from participants comprise the strength of qualitative interviewing to describe personal experiences with companion animal attachment.

Caregiving for most respondents was viewed a reciprocal as the dogs were service animals in addition to companions (Kwong et al., 2011). A tangible element was part of these human-dog bonds. Grief was reported as being similar to the loss of another person -- "It's like your world has come to an end. You don't have anybody to look after and there's nobody there to love you back" (p.430). A majority of participants reported secure attachments with their dogs as they felt that they could rely on their animals with no anxiety and that their dogs provided comfort to them in times of distress. (Kwong et al., 2011) The author references several past studies on vulnerable populations (survivors of sexual abuse and the elderly) that have shown how a companion animal can help to compensate for a lack of human support (Kwong et al., 2011). As LGBT+ youth are most certainly a comparably vulnerable population, I derive further support for my dissertation topic. Taylor, Fraser, and Riggs (2017) wrote about studies showing the importance of companion animals to transgender people during their gender transition and to HIV positive gay men that also lacked social support.

Building upon this theme of animals positively influencing health status, (Kurdek, 2008; Kurdek, 2009; Kwong et al., 2011; Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, eds, 2000), Julius (2013) wrote about the positive health effects of companion animals and attachment bonds with pets. An example of a young boy "Tim" is given in the opening chapter. Tim's parents had tragically

expired two months prior to date written. He had been unable to express his feelings, begin to process his grief, or open up to a therapist. A dog "Toto" was introduced into a session with Tim. The boy hugged the dog and cried for half an hour before he told the dog about the loss of his parents (Julius, 2013). The use of dogs in conjunction with psychotherapy helps to increase trust in the clinician and overall social behavior and to decrease depression and anxiety (Julius, 2013). This example from Julius (2013) provides support for the notion of humans entrusting painful experiences with an animal who can not talk back yet is still able to respond without judgement. A pet or therapeutic animal can help to decrease feelings of loneliness; in turn loneliness has been shown to increase a person's susceptibility to health issues (Zasloff & Kidd, 1994). Companion animals also can combat loneliness for youth by providing a form of emotional and psychological support that elevates self-esteem and enables youth to form positive self-view (Purewal et al., 2017). A possible direct causal association between having companion animals and health is based upon owners' perceptions that an animal plays an important relationship role in their lives (Lane, McNicholas, & Collis, 1998). The above example of Tim and Toto (Julius, 2013) suggested that animal-assisted therapies may also draw upon this unique relationship outside of pet ownership. Lane et al. (1998) found that "(t)he relationship can involve confiding and talking to the pet, a feeling of empathy and a sense of loving and being loved which can combat loneliness and depression, particularly in individuals who feel socially isolated. Pets also meet an esteem function in a providing a 'need to be needed' "(p.52).

Julius (2013) also referenced attachment criteria as delineated by Ainsworth (1991) regarding animals and offered four conclusions:

1. The attachment figure is a reliable source of comfort and reassurance that allows for exploration;

2. The attachment figure is approached in the case of emotional stress in order to achieve proximity and a feeling of security;
3. The physical proximity to an attachment figure is associated with positive emotions; and
4. Separations from the attachment figure are associated with negative emotions: (p. 131).

Further, Julius (2013) reported that 75% of children in previous studies turn to their animal when emotionally stressed. This data suggests possible attachment features of a safe haven, secure base, and physical proximity. Julius (2013) also reported that prior studies have not provided conclusive evidence regarding the attachment patterns for humans with humans to humans with animals. The gap in knowledge of this form of attachment as a substitute for human- to- human relationships specific to LGBT+ youth exists in social work research. I question if LGBT+ youth as a marginalized group can use companion animals in place of other people regarding their support networks.

In a further mixed methods study, Rockett and Carr (2014) also wrote about attachment patterns to animals and posed three questions for research: 1. Are animals able to satisfy human attachment needs? 2. Might similar models be employed to human attachment research when specifically exploring the attachment of humans with animals? 3. What is the role of animals when working with human attachment issues in the therapeutic setting (p.415)?

When working with people with insecure attachments, animals may assist therapists in overcoming such patterns (Rockett & Carr, 2014). As also reported in the study by Julius (2013), Decreased levels of trust pervade relationships when insecure attachment patterns present but an animal's ability to offer unconditional support may be of assistance. Rockett and Carr (2014)

wrote that (a)nimals may therefore be able to enter an insecure individual's world with greater ease, owing to their open, unthreatening, attention-seeking natures that offer, as well as take love, affection, and positivity" (pp.423-4). Living with companion animals in a shared living space has been linked to an increase in individual's self-esteem, self-worth, and healthy narcissism (Rockett & Carr, 2014).

In addition to the studies on attachment from Julius (2013) and Rockett and Carr (2014), self-esteem of children relating to companion animals stemming from such attachments comprised a study by Endenberg and Van Lith (2011). The impact of companion animals on children's own vision of self-esteem was further examined in this research (Endenberg & Van Lith, 2011). While not elaborating on a causal relationship, companion animals played a significantly positive role in the development of self-esteem, self resiliency, and empathy among children who lived with them. Children who grew up with companion animals reported higher levels self-esteem, responsibility, and empathy with animals that transfer to empathy with other people as adults, than those children who did not (Endenberg & Van Lith, 2011).

This study examined the child's development based on human social support and the usefulness of companion animals. Endenberg and Van Lith (2011) stated that "(h)ow a child develops is also influenced by the child's social network; the social development of a child without friends is very different from that of a child with many friends." (p.209) The young adolescents in this study rated companion animals above all humans except their parents as assisting them to feel satisfied with themselves (Endenberg & Van Lith, 2011).

The prior cited studies pertained to dogs (Julius, 2013; Kurdek, 2008, 2009; Kwong et al., 2011; Rockett & Carr, 2014). Dogs are not the only companion animals studied in this context

and I wanted to hear experiences of LGBT+ youth with other household animals including cats as the most common pets in America. Serpell (1996) researched attachment levels between the behavior of both dogs and cats and owner attachment levels. The convenience sample study of 37 dog owners and 47 cat owners found a causal link between the owner's attachment level and overall satisfaction with their animal's behavior. Particularly among dog owners, the findings suggested that moderate attached owners were less satisfied with their pet's behavior than those who had stronger attachments (Serpell, 1996) I note a suggestion of a possible symbiotic mutual support connection. However, the results from cat owners provided less consistency than those reported from dog owners (Serpell, 1996).

Stammbach, Stammbach, and Turner (1999) conducted a quantitative study specifically with 670 purposively sampled female cat owners; sampling was specific to include only women who had cats in their households. The study sought to assess the degree of attachment to cats as it correlated with human support. Some respondents reported a substitution with cats for persons in their social network but most participants reported using cats in addition to human support. Cats provided emotional, not tangible, support for many as opposed to the physical benefits of a service type animal. A correlation also was found between the attachment to cats and perceived emotional support from the animal and the ways gender and socioeconomic demographics might affect this correlation. Several results of note were that an increased attachment to cats was reported in correlation with a lower level of human significant others. For LGBT+ youth who have limited a social support network, I am interested to learn if elevated attachments to companion animals will correlate with a reduced level of available human support. The higher attachment to cats, the more support that subjects felt that they received from the cat. Demographically, a difference in household composition impacted attachment levels: the more

people in a household, the lower attachment to cats were reported while the higher number of cats in a household produced a higher level of attachment to cats (Stammbach et al., 1999). This statistic could possibly be hypothesized to transfer to socially isolated LGBT+ youth with minimal household human support.

The final study in this review is a dissertation by Putney (2012). Through 12 qualitative interviews, Putney applies Winnicott's Object Relations among other theories. Object Relations Theory pertains to the development of a sense of self in relation to others in the environment with particular emphasis on a mother figure. The focus was on older lesbians and their attachment to their dogs which is in contrast to other research which looked broadly at both heterosexual and LGBT attachment with companion animals and did not specifically examine the minority stress for LGBT people living in a homophobic society. All participants were from northern New England with 11 of the 12 identifying as white and the other person identifying as being of a mixed race. All of the subjects were out and open about their sexuality.

All participants in Putney's study reported that their dogs provided unconditional and non-judgmental love. One third reported that their dogs were substitutes for people and this had been the case since childhood especially as people were not available as sources for support in homophobic households. Three quarters of the participants reported that in times of trauma, their dogs helped to create a safe place in which to retreat. Another key finding was that many interviewees equated the oppression of LGBT people to the mistreatment of animals. The participants reported that LGBT people are marginalized by others in the same way that some people are abusive to animals as non-worthy.

As the only academic study exclusive to an LGBT population with companion animal attachment that I have located, Putney's (2012) interviews with participants provided first hand experiences of heterosexist or homophobic oppression that can be related to my research participants. I am not studying this precise age group, but rather youth from eighteen to twenty-five years of age with perhaps fewer solidified emotional or financial resources and who are dependent upon human adults. Through qualitative interviews, I sought to elicit individual stories that may share the common themes of finding comfort in one's animals.

I have cited a variety of articles on heterosexism with homophobia or transphobia, LGBT+ attachment, and companion animal attachment but have sought to thread the commonalities of each into an added justification for my present study and dissertation. No single theme emerges as more pertinent to my study but rather as interdisciplinary elements that assist to analyze this population phenomena with animals. Both quantitative and qualitative empirical research has produced data and technical elements to guide my work and allowed me to propose my research questions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

My theoretical approach used Self Psychology (Goldberg, ed., 1978; Kohut, 1985; Martinez, 2003; Rowe, 2011; Togashi, 2009) with elements of Attachment Theory (Ainsworth, 1991; Bowlby, 1973, 1979, 1982, 1988). The combined elements of both complement each other regarding viewing the similarities of selfobjects and attachment objects (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005). As shown in the literature review, these concepts have not been used in studying LGBT+ youth and hence no prior studies matching my proposal have been located. Companion animal usage as a twinship selfobject will be the theoretical lens for my study. While

the initial addition of this twinship need to Kohut's first concepts of a parental and grandiosity selfobject pertained to a therapist and client relationship, I examined the twinship need beyond a clinical therapeutic setting. Kohut did not write as extensively on twinship selfobjects as compared to his publications on mirroring and idealized selfobjects (Martinez, 2003). In Self Psychology, individuals seek out twinship support often in the form of peers, siblings, or friends in order to develop a healthy narcissism (Kohut, 1985). Martinez (2003) referenced the feeling of alikeness and the role of skill acquisition as two aspects of the twinship selfobject that Kohut emphasized. Unlike Rowe (2011), I seek to broaden the definition of who or what comprises twinship but am not proposing an additional selfobject as an extension of Kohut's concept. This dissertation explored if and how LGBT+ youth may use companion animals for this same purpose.

These similarities between Attachment Theory as espoused by Bowlby and Winnicott are drawn with Kohut's Self Psychology (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005). Both theories describe objects that people seek in helping to develop into adulthood -- whether they are termed as attachment objects or selfobjects. Banai et al. (2005) presented a scholarly collection of seven studies on a homogenous Israeli population looking specifically at selfobject needs: mirroring, idealization, and twinship. The authors conducted each of the seven studies and posited that selfobjects "can provide a sense of inner security and resilience, calm a person in times of stress, and repair wounds to self-esteem inflicted by temporary failures, rejections, and disappointment" (p.226). Homophobia can easily be defined as a threat to an LGBT person's healthy narcissism. The researcher emphasized the need for tripolar selfobjects for the development of empathy towards others and for social skills in general. The first study examined the avoidance of selfobject needs and the associated interpersonal maladjustment and inability to maintain close



relationships (p.230) while the results from the following six also contributed to the overall findings on this topic. This avoidance was hypothesized to be due to a fear of rejection which therefore coincides with the fear faced by LGBT youth in the coming out process.

Both the psychodynamic theories of Attachment Theory and Self Psychology lend to my theoretical framework for my study. Children and youth turn to objects in their environment in order to develop into adults. The commonalities of the two theories are often interchangeable and this dissertation is not exclusive to either psychological approach.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methods**

#### **Statement of the Problem and Purpose of Study**

Heterosexism pervades through much of American society despite significant gains in LGBT+ acknowledgement and acceptance. Sexually developing adolescents in general encounter images of straight relationships, marriage, and bearing children through procreation. Peers at school freely discuss opposite sex partners and media resources reinforce a portrayal of a heterosexual lifestyle as the expected life course for all. LGBT+ roles are frequently viewed by a heterosexist society as abnormal or in need of reparative therapy. LGBT+ young adults do not see the same level of modeling in relationships or strong adult role models as compared to heterosexual relations or figures.

Due to reported high rates of social isolation and lack of fellow human support for LGBT+ youth grappling with their sexuality and identity, other forms of support merit examination. This is buttressed by the higher incidence of suicide particularly amongst transgender youth that can be linked to familial non-support. As a social worker, I found these rates of suicide alarming and am disturbed at the stress of non-acceptance experienced by so many LGBT+ adolescents. Researchers have studied the bond between marginalized humans and companion animals to ascertain the clinical significance in the development of self-esteem and overall development but no studies can be found that are specific to this population.

I have attempted to augment professional knowledge through this dissertation and to inspire further tools to use in therapeutic work with unsupported LGBT+ youth. My literature review evidences extensive research on human to animal bonding and the use of animal assisted therapies with marginalized populations. Experiences of LGBT+ youth with the usage of

companion animals as twinship self-objects or attachment objects was sought through qualitative interviews.

### **Significance of the Study**

Clinicians constantly seek to find therapeutic tools to help LGBT+ individuals in developing their sexual identity and reaching a synthesis with society (Cass, 1979). LGBT+ as well as other youth populations have often looked to unconventional sources of support when traditional outlets are marginal. LGBT+ youth centers, Gay-Straight Alliances in schools, and cyber support serve as examples of additional methods to increase LGBT+ youth's support network. Companion animals provide another form of support and security as highlighted by Walsh (2009A) (2009B) and Julius (2013).

An aim of this study was to highlight how LGBT+ youth have used companion animals in their own paths to adulthood. There is a gap in knowledge about this particular population and how or if companion animals have been used to develop a healthy narcissism. This study also provided insight from using Self Psychology as a theoretical lens in addition to Attachment theory. In particular, the use of companion animals as twinship selfobjects is explored further. Togashi (2009) wrote that in North American horizontal culture, "individuals who are of the same social rank develop a sense of kinship with each other" (p.25). Contrary to vertical relationships as in a parent to child or teacher to student, a horizontal twinship occurs between peers. This study examined the experiences of LGBT+ youth who have used companion animals in this regard as perhaps fears of coming out or heterosexist reactions have severely limited human horizontal support systems.

## **Research Design**

The research is a qualitative empirical study examining individual experiences of LGBT+ youth and companion animal attachment. As I sought to hear personal experiences rather than obtain mass data collection, a qualitative study was much more applicable than a quantitative project. Self Psychology and Attachment Theory are personal in nature and participant narratives contributed collectively to the purpose of the study. A qualitative approach also allowed for a close examination of a specific population not currently studied in the field.

The study combined techniques of a phenomenological work and narrative analysis as outlined in the texts by Padgett (2008), Shkedi (2005), and Stake (1995). I wanted to hear what each individual had experienced as an LGBT+ youth and how their community affected their growth. I also wanted to learn what the respondent's relationship with companion animals had been like and how these animals impacted them as LGBT+ adolescents. As my studied population was over age eighteen, their retrospective experiences could offer an overall view of how these relationships shaped their development.

Shkedi (2005) wrote that “(t)he phenomenological approach focuses on understanding the meaning that events have for the persons participating in them.” (p.52). Participants in the study all shared the phenomena of being LGBT+ and sharing a bond with companion animals. Atkinson and Delamont (2006) wrote that “(n)arratives are social phenomena” (p.165). From the onset of my study, I had planned to code each interview after completion. This has been a standard mode of data analysis in qualitative research. I had anticipated that finding themes among codes would assist in unifying experiences while still highlighting the individual richness of narrative storytelling from each participant. From the first reading of the collective of transcribed interviews, I developed an initial code tree. However as I began to code each

individual interview, the tree grew tremendously with new themes and child-codes branching out from primary codes. My protocol aligned with Braun and Clarke (2006) and their suggested use of six phases of qualitative research:

1. Becoming familiar with the interview data
2. Creating initial codes
3. Finding themes from the coding
4. Reviewing themes for order
5. Capturing the definition of themes
6. Writing my analysis

Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, and Bertsch (2006) proposed several interesting concepts of narrative analytics that I incorporated into my methodological approach and analysis to the interviews. In addition to recording responses to my questions, coding for themes, and listening for the plot of a respondent's story, I composed "I poems" from the actual words of each participant (Gilligan et al., 2006).

When "listening for plot" (Gilligan et al., 2006), I was able to hear each participants' experience whether they were open about sexual identity or orientation disclosure to others as well as who were the players (human or animal) in their lives. In the process of notating codes and themes, this process helped me to identify the most appropriate terminology including using the participant's own words. "Listening for plot" (Gilligan et al., 2006) allowed me to hear each individual's layer of developmental experience in context of a heterosexist society.

Gilligan et al. (2006) described "I poems" as writing each time a participant uses the word "I" followed by the verb and if appropriate object noun. This collection of statements forms

an "I poem". Through this analytical process I have heard perceptions of self-image particularly regarding heterosexism and homophobia in contrast to healthy narcissism as defined by Self Psychology. I was able to listen for rhythms in speech patterns that each respondent used, notated repeated verb usage as possible themes in the interview, and saw how each person viewed their relationship with companion animals.

The third step of this process is "listening for contrapuntal voices" (Gilligan et al., 2006). The authors describe the action as hearing the participant's view of others' perceptions of events or actions in the interview. This is particularly useful for LGBT+ youth that may be facing social isolation based on their sexual orientation or gender identity and find themselves in conflict with society, communities, or even heterosexist families and households. I was able to listen for perceptions of mixed messages on sexual issues from the same people in the participant's life and heard the internal struggles from each person regarding their sexual development. I also gained added depth to descriptions of selfobject roles of companion animals to the respondent. The codes regarding Sexual Development and External Society in particular captured the contrapuntal voices in each interview.

## **Sampling**

For my study I utilized both purposive sampling as well as snowball sampling as I formulated a comprehensive list of inclusion and exclusion criteria. I wanted to recruit LGBT+ young adults (age 18-25) who self-reported a strong relationship with companion animals or pets from their childhoods and adolescence as asked in my initial recruitment questionnaire. In order to recruit a diverse sample, I sought individuals from multiple racial backgrounds, socioeconomic and educational statuses, religious affiliations, and openness about one's sexuality

and gender identification. I encouraged participants with different gender variations including those people who are cisgender, transgender, or non-gender conforming. To meet these goals I recruited from a variety of settings in the metropolitan Philadelphia area. Physically I hung flyers throughout the University of Pennsylvania campus, in businesses in the Gayborhood area in Center City Philadelphia, and in animal shelters in Southern New Jersey. Digitally I distributed recruitment flyers with information about the study to student life and LGBT centers in various local post-secondary institutions and universities, with a local college's sociology department, to multiple LGBT+ college student organizations, to AIDS service organizations, with gay drop-in centers for youth and people of color, to a transgender surgical office, on a local PFLAG's (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) Facebook site, and with multiple animal shelters, pet businesses, and veterinary clinics in the area. Additionally I presented details about my study and recruitment search for the Out4Stem program through the Philadelphia College of Physicians and Mutter Museum. The members of this group are LGBT+ young adults who are learning about future careers in the medical field. A strong diversity in socioeconomic and racial backgrounds is also represented in program membership as many youth are referred by their high schools in Philadelphia with others coming from the collegiate or post graduate setting. Unfortunately no participants came from this outreach. I also presented for a course at the University of Pennsylvania School of Policy and Practice on animal assisted social work services but again received no participant response. Both of these attempts did spark conversation and inquisitive follow-up from the audiences. I was encouraged to hear from numerous youth at both settings about their own self-identification as LGBT+ and having found strong linkages with companion animals to their own development.

I initially wanted to sample from the LGBT center at Penn as I had anticipated students to be from an upper middle-class or above socio-economic status and well educated. Penn strives to be a nurturing environment for sexual minority groups and I anticipated a high level of openness about one's LGBT status to others from these recruits. In particular a strong societal stigmatization pervades the experiences of many transgendered individuals and my hope is that participants who safely self-identify as transgender will be included in this student population. The college setting also incorporates students from multiple ethnic and racial groups as well as those from various religious backgrounds. One participant, "Natalie", saw my digital posting in the center's newsletter and was recruited for an interview. A second participant, "Molly", responded after a friend saw my digital flyer that was distributed to the Wharton undergraduate LGBT organization that falls under the umbrella of the Penn LGBT Center.

Another planned avenue was to recruit from the Ryan Veterinary Hospital at Penn. My hope was that this would open up my potential pool of participants to LGBT youth not affiliated with Penn but from West Philadelphia and the metropolitan community. After consulting with the Dean of Student Life for the Veterinary School at Penn, I learned that there was not a space in the hospital to advertise for potential participants. Instead she sent an email to every current student in the veterinary school with my recruitment flyer and information about my study. "Alex" and "Sara Katherine" were recruited from this email and a third person, "Keri" was referred by one of the veterinary students.

I planned to recruit also from several animal shelters in Camden County, NJ. Potentially shelter staff, volunteers, or animal adopters from suburban locations would add socioeconomic diversity as well as the potential for people not open about their sexuality as they would not be affiliated with a university-safe setting. From the Animal Adoption Center in New



Jersey, “David” and “James” agreed to be interviewed for my study. Both participants resided in suburban New Jersey in contrast to my earlier recruits who all lived in Philadelphia.

I also wanted to recruit participants from an animal shelter in the "Gayborhood" of Philadelphia or the William Way Center from several blocks away. A high concentration of each population component of LGBT lives in this area of Center City and combined with an evident interest in animals, I hoped to find a high interest in participation. No responses arose from my flyer in the shelter from this area nor at the William Way Center; I then posted flyers throughout the Gayborhood at various eateries and coffeehouses. Two participants, “Mathew” and “Jay”, responded after seeing a recruitment flyer hanging in a local ice cream parlor.

My final participant responded to a digital flyer that was distributed by the owner of an LGBT-friendly dog walking service in Philadelphia. I had located this service online as the company’s website specified that the service welcomed members of the LGBT community for both potential staff and clients. The owner forwarded the recruitment flyer and information on my study to all of her employees. “Cynthia” responded to me via email within an hour of me disseminating my recruitment information to the dog walking service.

### **Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria**

In order to meet the search criteria to be interviewed, participants needed to be

- Between 18 and 25 years of age
- Self-identified as LGBT or a gender/sexual minority
- Residing in the metropolitan Philadelphia area including New Jersey and be available for an in-person interview

- Have a self-identified strong relationship with pets or companion animals

The only additional exclusionary criteria were that participants had to be speakers of English to participate in the study. The actual recruitment flyer is included as Appendix 1.

## **Interviews**

Through in-depth interviews, I collected retrospective data from the 10 participants that met the inclusion criteria. Nine participants contacted me using email and one individual communicated via texting to my cell phone. On my recruitment flyer I had listed both modalities of communication and left the option to the participant based on their preferred method to contact me. I further explained my study and overall dissertation to the participants as well as reiterated my inclusion criteria and interview protocol. Upon verbal consent to proceed from the participant, we scheduled a mutually agreed upon date and time for the interview. I explained that each participant was to select their own pseudonym to protect one's identity or else the interviewer would choose a fictitious name for the participant. I did not use any actual name for participants as confidentiality had to be ensured to allow for honest recounting of private and often difficult moments of retrospection in each interview. One participant stated that she would like to use her actual name for the interview. I was not comfortable with using anyone's actual identity as the dissertation would be published and accessible to the public; I created a pseudonym for her. Several participants selected a surname to be used in addition to a fictitious first name; I only used first names as pseudonyms in order to be consistent with all ten interviews. I began each interview with a demographic questionnaire to collect descriptors as well as the participant's chosen pseudonym.

Six interviews took place at the Penn LGBT Center. All six of these participants resided in Philadelphia with most living near the University of Pennsylvania campus. For privacy, I reserved the only room with a closing door at the center which was only available on weekdays. All interviews at the Penn LGBT Center occurred in the afternoon. Two interviews took place at the School of Policy and Practice of the University of Pennsylvania for participants who lived in Pennsylvania but were not available for a weekday interview. I conducted both in the student lounge with one on a Saturday and the other on a Sunday when no classes were in session and no other students were present. I interviewed my two New Jersey residents in my workplace at Kennedy Dialysis Center in Voorhees, NJ. One interview took place in the late afternoon with the other occurring on a Saturday morning; I interviewed each participant in the private conference room adjacent to my office. All ten participants were compensated for their time with \$10 gift cards to Wawa. I offered transportation or parking reimbursement to all participants but none elected to receive such assistance. A typed consent form (see Appendix 2) and description of the study as approved by the Institutional Review Board was reviewed with and given to each participant. The Institutional Review Board stated that a signature from the participant was not necessary as another step in protecting each individual's true identity.

I audio recorded each interview with both two different pieces of equipment to ensure reliability. My primary technical device was a miniature digital voice recorder. After each interview, the recording was downloaded directly into a computer audio file. My secondary device was a cassette recorder using a microphone and standard tapes. The digital voice recorder performed as expected and was able to capture each interview completely. A private transcriptionist, who did not have access to the participant's true identity, produced the transcripts from the computer audio files by typing each file into a Microsoft Word document. I

received the typed transcripts as individual attachments via email. I edited each interview for accuracy and provided clarity to any inaudible spoken content from the interviewer.

The first step of my analysis involved a detailed reading of the transcript and to create an I-Poem. I composed a 7 to 18 page I-Poem from each transcript (see Appendix 3 and 4 for full I-Poems on David and Molly) and typed individual documents for each poem. The thorough reading of each transcript in order to create an I-Poem fostered a familiarity with each typed interview to augment my prior exposure as the interviewer.

I next uploaded each transcript individually into the qualitative analytic software program Dedoose. I coded each interview and created a tree of 174 codes. The tree contains primary codes as well as child codes to various themes. Dedoose allowed for multiple coding for repeated excerpts from transcribed interviews and offered analytic tools to measure the presence of codes in individual interviews and co-occurring codes incidences. Appendix 5 is a word cloud of all codes from the interviews. The size of the font in the word cloud is directly correlated to the appearance of the code in the final analysis of the ten interviews.

## **Research Questions**

A commonality for participants is sexual or gender minority status. I wanted to hear directly about their experiences with being in the closet, coming out (if applicable), relationships with a support system, and overall occurrences in a heterosexist society. The semi-structured interviews focused on retrospective data from each participant's adolescence. In each interview, I asked the research questions from my interview guide (see Appendix 6). Depending on a participant's answer, the conversations included individualized probes and follow up questions.

- What was your experience like as an LGBT+ youth growing into an adult?
- Tell me about your experience regarding sexual development in your youth?
- Are you currently out?
- When did you first realize that you were LGBT+? Tell me about that experience.
- If so, at what age? Was coming out in stages for you? If not, what are the reasons that you are not out?
- What was it like coming out to your family? How did they react?
- If not out, how do you feel they would react?
- What was it like coming out to your friends? What was their reaction?
- If not out, how do you feel that they would react?
- Tell me about your experiences with heterosexism? How did this affect how you saw yourself as an LGBT+ youth?

Social isolation is pervasive for many LGBT+ youth, yet not every person has lived in an outwardly homophobic or hostile home environment. This study included participants from a variety of backgrounds that voice their experiences with their families, schools, and communities.

- As a sexually developing youth, what was your social support system like?
- How would you describe your support system?
- Tell me about your school? family? church? friends?

- o Did you have siblings? Or other relatives close in age to you? Were they older/ younger than you? What was your relationship like with them?
- o Who was in your support system? How out were you to them?
- o Was there a person that you were able to confide in? Tell me about them.
- o Was there a person who surprisingly rejected you in time of need? Tell me about them.
- o In what ways did you find to learn more about your sexuality?  
Did you talk about your sexual identity or orientation with anyone? What was that like for you?

This study obtained retrospective information from participants as I examined adolescent development for LGBT+ youth. Present information regarding companion animals was sought as well.

- o What has your experience been like with pets?
- o Did you have pets in your own household? Or were they in another location or person's home?
- o What pets did you have?
- o What are your first memories of a pet?
- o Was there one or a few that you felt particularly close with? Tell me more.
- o Did you talk to your pets? What kinds of things did you tell them?
- o Did you consider your pet to be your friend? Why or why not?
- o During adolescence or sexual development, did your relationship with pets change? Tell me about your pets during this period.

- o Did you hold or your cuddle your pet if you were upset? Tell me about those times.
- o Did your pets influence the way you saw yourself? Tell me more.
- o How did pets affect your relationships with other people?
- o What feelings did you have about feeding, grooming, or walking your pet?  
Did this affect your sense of importance?
- o Do you have pets now? If so, tell me about them.

My final questions provided a chance for participants to reflect upon how their past experiences have impacted their lives now as young adults. This section allow for a summarization of the questions posed earlier in the interview regarding sexual development and companion animal influence.

- How did your experiences with animals as an LGBT+ youth affect you now as a young adult?
- Presently, do you have people that are a support for you? pets? Tell me about them?
- Do you talk to pets now? What kinds of things do you say to them?
- Do you find comfort in physically having a pet? In what way?
- As an adult, are you able to discuss your LGBT+ status with other people?
- Has your ability to talk about your sexuality with other people changed since the time you were an adolescent? If yes, in what ways? If not, why do you think that is?

- Did having pets in your youth affect your current self esteem? Did having pets affect your current academic or career path? Tell me more.

The interview questions branched out as each participant shared different experiences and some answers lead to follow-up questions, a need to seek clarifications, prompts, and individual modifications of the order of questions posed. As a social worker, I used the interview guide as a frame for each session but allowed the interviews to progress into a conversation. Phenomenally all participants met the inclusion criteria as clients in my social work setting have also needed to have commonalities in order to be served by my healthcare agency. The contexts and criteria differed between this research and my social work employment. In addition to the interview taking place in a neutral physical setting, I worked to develop rapport quickly with each participant in order to establish a safe and comfortable atmosphere to share personal stories (Dicicco-Bloom, B & Crabtree, B., 2006). I sought to hear individual participant's life experiences and thusly welcomed a semi-structured free forum for each person to tell their own story yet still was able to capture the shared elements of self-identifying as LGBT+ and having had a strong relationship with companion animals.

## **Participants**

Ten participants were interviewed for the study:

- Sara Katherine
  - A 24 year old White cisgender female who identified as bisexual or “heteroflexible”. She grew up in a suburban area and currently resided in Philadelphia where she was a veterinary student.



- Keri
  - A 25 year old White cisgender female who self-identified as lesbian or queer.

Keri grew up in both Washington State and in Pennsylvania. Her residence at the time of the interview was in Philadelphia where she worked as a full-time mental health therapist after having completed college.
- James
  - A 26 year old White cisgender male. He had just turned 26 before the interview but was included as he was 25 when the study had begun. He identifies as gay and grew up in Southern New Jersey. He currently resided in Central New Jersey where he worked was employed full-time post college.
- Alex
  - A 22 year old White cisgender male who identified as gay. He was raised in rural Southwestern Pennsylvania but resided in Philadelphia where he was a first year veterinary student.
- David
  - A 24 year old Black transgender male. He cited trans as being his LGBT+ affiliation and alluded to a bisexual orientation. He both grew up and presently resided in Southern New Jersey. David was on Social Security Disability Insurance and had not attended college.
- Molly
  - A 21 biracial (Black and White) cisgender female who identified as bisexual. She grew up in both suburban Maryland and in Philadelphia. She presently resided in Philadelphia where she was an undergraduate college student.

- Natalie
  - A 20 year old Caribbean-American cisgender female who used the term gay to describe her sexual orientation. She was raised in Central New Jersey but presently lived in Philadelphia where she also was an undergraduate college student.
- Jay
  - A 23 year old South Asian cisgender male who self-identified as gay. He grew up in Northern New Jersey but currently lived in Philadelphia where he was a medical student.
- Mathew
  - A 24 year old White cisgender male who identified as gay. He was both raised in and currently resided in suburban Pennsylvania. He worked full-time as a higher education counselor post college.
- Cynthia
  - A 25 year old White cisgender female who self-identified as pansexual. She grew up in suburban Pennsylvania but currently resided in Philadelphia where she worked full-time as a dog-walker post college studies.

Overall six participants identified as White, with two as Black, one as Asian, and one as biracial. Genders were equally represented with five female and five male participants. Nine people were cisgender with one person identifying as transgender. Nine participants were either attending or had completed college. Two were presently undergraduates, two were in veterinary school, one in medical school, four were working after college, and one was disabled and had not attended college. Eight participants had grown up in a suburban area with one having been raised

in a rural community and one in an urban environment. At the time of the interview, seven participants resided in Philadelphia with one participant living in Bucks County, PA. The remaining two participants resided in suburban New Jersey at the present. Three participants were Pan or Bisexual, 2 were lesbians, 4 were gay men, and one participant identified as transgender for his LGBT+ affiliation.

## **Chapter 4: I Poems**

One of the most beneficial aspects of a qualitative study is the gathering of a richly personal story from participants. After completing each interview and reviewing the subsequent transcript, I wanted to begin my analysis of each participant's rhythmic speech in the interview while also exploring how they viewed themselves through personal thought patterns. Rhythm in poetry can be measured with an iambic pentameter. The patterns of speech in themselves can be musical and rhythmic from lines of speech. Examples include how self confident words often accompany a spoken rhythm as conversely disjointed thoughts can often at times display an irregular rhythmic pattern. I analyzed each participant's own words in an effort to capture both of these analytic elements and to better understand how the individual questioned their own actions and those around them during the tempestuous period of sexual development. The basic procedure entailed firstly to read the transcript in its entirety with particular emphasis on every time the participant used the word "I" in any sentence. The next step involved selecting every first-person "I" statement within each transcript along with an accompanying verb. When appropriate, other descriptive and action related words were included with the "I" phrase but they were kept in the exact order in which the participant spoke them (Gilligan et al., 2006). By keeping all "I" statements in exact chronological order as they were spoken, the participant's perceived thought process was preserved in the context of the interview. I selected and filtered the surrounding words to each "I" statement but did not create any new concepts or change any content from the actual words of the participant. By adhering to the same process for all of the interviews, I composed ten individual "I Poems".

The artistic beauty from each person's story came to life after I had written each "I Poem" and I marveled at the epic quality that leapt from the written text. Sexual uncertainty arose as a theme from each "I Poem":

*I was kind of a prude*

*I was raised*

*I didn't really*

*I don't think*

*I wouldn't say*

*I guess*

*I would have crushes*

*I would just think*

*I just wanted*

*I think*

*I kind of admitted*

*I wasn't straight*

*(Cynthia, 25 year old pansexual female)*

In this excerpt from Cynthia's "I Poem", her questioning about her own sexual orientation appeared with succinct clarity from her spoken word. Natalie shared her struggle with sexual orientation whilst hearing heteronormative judgements:

*I sort of grew up*

*I needed*

*I was gonna be straight*

*I know*

*I am pretty straight passing*

*I'm talking*

*I'm like*

*I'm super gay*

*I don't*

*I mean*

*I hated myself*

*I feel*

*I was*

*I probably*

*I had*

*I grew up hearing*

*I was like*

*I had been bearing*

*I think*

*I was like*

*I'm bi*

*I was like*

*I'm kidding*

*I'm gay*

*(Natalie, 20 year old lesbian)*

This stage of confusion or perhaps denial (Cass, 1979) was echoed in other "I Poems" as well as discussion on coming out or not:

*I came to terms*

*I started to realize that*

*I might be a little bit too*

*I felt like*

*I had to repress it*

*I'm not really out*

*I think they're aware*

*I think*

*I think now*

*I think with most people*

*I think early on*

*I had*

*I felt like*

*I had to  
I kind of denied  
I saw a therapist  
I went to  
I guess  
I came out*

*(Sara Katherine, 24 year old bisexual female)*

Sara Katherine's words offered a portrayal of denial, seeking mental health services, and an eventual decision to come out. Keri offers an account of coming out as bisexual at first, though she identified as a lesbian at the time of the interview. Her confusion in admitting her feelings over time as balanced by her religious affiliation and eventual life at college were vividly recounted in her "I Poem":

*I was experiencing like feelings  
I was in high school  
I wouldn't like tag along  
I was like whaaat  
I was very  
I grew up  
I was still  
I didn't have  
I started  
I co-led a bible study  
I came to the fact*



*I was like okay so it's okay*

*I came out as bi*

*I'm not attracted to*

*I came to identify*

*I graduated college*

*I ended up dating*

*I still identified*

*(Keri, 25 year old lesbian)*

Molly (see Appendix 4 for her “I Poem” in its entirety) told about her uncertainty of her bisexual orientation in her “I Poem”. She relayed her first feelings of attraction towards another female:

*I'm straight*

*I think*

*I got to school*

*I had*

*I was like oh my God*

*I was*

*I'm like*

*I just want to be her*

*I still think like*

*I was like*

*I'm straight*

*I just think*

*I guess*

*I still prefer guys*

*I hadn't had*

*I was just kind of*

*I also find*

*I'm not*

*I was just kind of*

*I went up*

*I really like this girl*

*(Molly, 21 year old bisexual female)*

David (see Appendix 3 also for his full “I-Poem”) had a unique double coming out. He was born female and his first coming out experience was regarding sexual orientation; his second coming out included his true gender identity:

*I came out*

*I was bi*

*I turned 18*

*I realized*

*I was like*

*I'm pretty sure*

*I'm supposed to be trans*

*I looked*

*I got*

*I'm a lot happier*

*I try*

*I'm scared*

*I don't*

*I always have*

*I'm afraid*

*I'm trans*

*(David, 24 year old transmale)*

Other “I-Poems” gave much more clarity to the coming out experience and disclosing a closely held personal secret to others; participants feared the worst about self-disclosure but hoped for positive growth from being open:

*I told her*

*I was going on a date*

*I was like a guy*

*I sort of like*

*I sort of came out*

*I decided*

*I was seeing*

*I first told*

*I told her*

*I was like*

*I'm gay*

*I remember*

*I told*

*I was gay*

*I told her*

*(Mathew, 24 year old gay male)*

James shared how he tried not to admit his sexual orientation but finally came out to a female friend after he developed feelings for a male co-worker:

*I kind of developed feelings*

*I worked with*

*I said*

*I bottled it up*

*I really*

*I had*

*I just*

*I had*

*I was talking*

*I just said*

*I call you*

*I called her*

*I just kinda*

*I kind of just spilled it*

*(James, 26 year old gay male)*

Jay told how he came out in his college years due to uncertainty:

*I felt like*

*I was the only gay person*

*I guess*

*I went to*

*I started wondering*

*I going to lose*

*I started thinking*

*I lost my virginity*

*I came out*

*I guess*

*I guess if*

*I loved*

*I would have come out sooner*

*I didn't come out*

*I was just*

*I was in the closet*

*(Jay, 23 year old gay male)*

In a contrary experience, Alex's "I-Poem" aligned with his full interview as a strong and confident person regarding his sexual orientation and ambivalence towards heterosexual norms:

*I knew*

*I was gay*

*I watched movies*

*I didn't understand*

*I didn't really understand*

*I even questioned*

*I knew*

*I grew up in a very small town*

*I figured out*

*I was able*

*I kind of was*

*I was never hiding*

*(Alex, 22 year old gay male)*

Throughout writing the "I-Poems", I could sense the rhythm of thought flowing from the participants. Some people gave short or repetitive mono-syllabic responses, with others stating disjointed and confused "I Statements" that aligned with the content of the story being told. At

times of confidence and self-assuredness, the “I Statements” reflected flowing and nearly musical speech. Regardless of the individual styles and statements, the “I Poems” offered an invaluable insight into the youths’ experiences beyond standard qualitative analysis. Another theme that arose from the “I-Poetry” surrounded the participants’ connections with animals:

*I had a ton of pets*

*I’m obsessed with them*

*I’m mostly obsessed with*

*I would marry him*

*I’ve ever met*

*I’ve met a lot of dogs*

*(Cynthia, 25 year old pansexual female)*

*I’ve always loved animals*

*I can*

*I’ve always loved animals*

*I’ve always loved*

*I always loved*

*I can remember*

*I was gay*

*I was straight*

*I didn’t really care*

*(Jay, 23 year old gay male)*

Molly revealed a secure attachment to her dog as she concurrently explored her sexuality with another woman:

*I took the dog*

*I'm dating a girl*

*I actually have*

*I meet*

*I love my dog*

*I think*

*I'm more comfortable*

*I am*

*I'd rather stay home*

*I'm an animal person*

*(Molly, 21 year old bisexual female)*

Several "I-Poems" read like love stories in which it is difficult to know that the object of affection is not a human. Keri elaborated on her connection with her dog in the interview and her words formed this poetic excerpt:

*I loved*

*I grew up*



*I always felt connected to her*

*I was*

*I am now*

*I always related to her*

*I always felt*

*I would go*

*I didn't feel like*

*I really had anyone else*

*I could really tell*

*I think*

*I know*

*I have one*

*(Keri, 25 year old lesbian)*

Sara Katherine's "I-Poem" also describes her feelings toward her dog. In this excerpt she unconsciously looks upon her dog for emotional comfort:

*I know*

*I would kind of just vent to her*

*I loved her*

*I feel like*

*I'm focusing*

*I turned so*

*I remember being really sad*

*I was talking to her*  
*I don't know*  
*I would feel better*  
*I was sad, but*  
*I definitely talked to her about happy times too*  
*I did yeah*  
*I've talked to*  
*I don't want to say selfish*  
*I want play*  
*I love*  
*I would just lay on her like a pillow*  
*I never really thought about it*

*(Sara Katherine, 24 year old bisexual female)*

Poetry in itself is a unique art-form that is personalized to the author's perspective whether written in the first person, as another being, or as an observer. The technique of writing "I-Poetry" (Gilligan et al., 2006) proved to be an invaluable analytic technique for my study and offered expressive insight into each interview. I composed each "I – Poem" as the first step in my qualitative analysis. Common themes of self questioning and love arose in the poetry and writing each "I-Poem" required my first detailed re-reading of every word of each interview. The spoken content drove the completion of each "I-Poem" and my goal was to be faithful to the exact words from the participant. Admittedly, I filtered connecting phrases, verbs, and descriptive words to

complete each line of the “I-Poem”, but I did not change any order of the words used in each interview. Carefully studying the spoken text prepared me for the next component of analysis – coding for themes for and content. For examples of full “I-Poems” please see Appendix 3 and 4. The “I-Poems” for David and Molly are shared in their entirety to serve as examples of the finished analytic product.

## Chapter 5: Family Composition

### Pets in Household

The next three chapters consist of excerpts from the actual ten interviews. As suggested by the interview guide (see Appendix 6), the topics of questions started with broader descriptions of the participant's past. Every interview included a discussion of companion animals or pets in one's household during each participant's childhood and adolescence. I had anticipated that perhaps some participants did not have a companion animal in their own household and might have formed a bond with an extended relative's animal or one in a neighbor's household. To the contrary, every participant reported pets as being both present and important in their own ancestral households. Every person told of how their home lives also included companion animals. Typical responses included the following:

*Molly (21 year old bisexual female): Yeah, it's a zoo.*

*Alex (22 year old gay male): Of course.*

*Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): Yeah I had a handful of animals.*

After establishing that companion animals were present, specific species were described. Most participants reported multiple species having lived in their households. The strongest bonds appeared between the participants and the most popular domesticated household species with many having had initial relationships with small animals as a younger child. Several participants who spent their childhood on farms reported bonds with larger species as well. Appendix 7 contains the modified genograms for each participant to define which companion

animals are referenced in the interviews. Self identified strong bonds with specific animals are notated as are the vital status of current and past companion animals.

## **Dogs**

The most commonly reported species from a participant's childhood was a dog. All interviews referenced a dog playing a role in each participant's childhood and adolescence. Even participants who do not currently have a dog in their household reported having dogs as having had a strong presence in their upbringing. Several participants elaborated on their first relationship with a dog and how this grew into bonds with subsequent dogs:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *My brown, my chestnut red brownish Australian Shepard, Farley. He was there when I was brought home and he was the same age as me because my parents had gotten him...like he died when I was fourteen. He was fourteen I think. Like he was always the same age as me. I remember my being on the ground with him and wrestling with him and probably pulling on his ears and doing things that you shouldn't do to a dog, but he tolerated it.*

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *When I was a baby-baby, I had a greyhound named Vador. He died when I was like two but my parents rescued him from the race track. And then we got Lucky, who was also a greyhound. And we had her until I was like in second grade. She was great.....we got Zoey. She's a husky lab mix. She was probably like my best friend. I loved her.* James (26 year old gay male): *We've always had dogs. Of varying sizes, shapes, colors, temperaments. We had a Great Dane that I remember from when I was very young. My parents had her before they had me.*

Jay (23 year old gay male): *...I have two dogs right now, one of them is Sparky.*

*He's a Westy.....and my other dog Cherry, she's a cocker spaniel.....It was great. he would follow me around the house. I would feed him, bathe him. It was pretty much like a movie scene of like a boy and his dog. We would run around back together, we would play fetch. I think it was a pretty stereotypical, or archetypical situation.*

*Molly (21 year old bisexual female): ...I got an American Kennel Club book that had every single dog breed. And I would go through and read everything about every dog breed and I was like begging for a dog. So we got Bailey. I guess 4th or 5th grade-ish. And he was a pug beagle mix. And he was like a fat little thing; he had an underbite. And he was mean because he was some puppy mill dog.....Molly. Molly Smiles. Because when she gets happy she like crinkles her nose up and smiles.....that's our current dog now, and she's great. She's an Australian Labradoodle.*

*Keri (25 year old lesbian): ..we always had a dog in the house at whatever point in time. And I have a dog now. We went through a few dogs growing up. My one dog Hans, he was from my early childhood. We got him when was three until I was eight. And then he went to live with my grandma.....and then we got another dog (Hayley) and she ended up — we ended up having to put her down because the neighbor complained because she got out one day and the neighbor's dog was one of those tiny toy chihuahuas. And she was a rescue dog and I'm pretty sure she thought it was a toy. But she didn't hurt the dog whatsoever, because she was really gentle with her toys. She just picked it up like that and the lady like freaked out.*

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): ....*Rex, who was the first dog that I ever had, he is my favorite. He was my favorite being in the whole world....He's a little Bichon. He's not like even two — he's like two feet, very chubby. Oh I can show you pictures!*

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *Our first dog was Brandy, and now we have Dakota and Molly. Dakota's a Golden and Molly's a Schnauzer.*

David (24 year old transmale): *I had a couple dogs as I got older. When I was like 16, 15, I had a couple dogs, but my dog got hit by a car, and the other one was too energetic, so we had to give it up.*

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *We had a dog (Shira). She was a mutt. We got her when I was five years old. She died when I was 17 in high school.*

## Cats

After dogs, the participants reported cats in their households more than any other species. Three participants discussed cats in detail. Sevillano and Flake (2016) discussed the protective features of relationships between humans and cats at the same level.

Alex (22 year old gay male): *Farley (his dog) died and two or three years went by before we got this kitten. We got this kitten my junior year of high school. He's a Rag Doll. He's a pretty exotic breed. They're fluffy; they're blue eyed; they've got Himalayan markings. And they grow quite large, like Maine Coons. Like he's 15 pounds.*

Molly (21 bisexual female): *I have a cat.*

David (24 year old transmale): *I always had cats.... I remember my first kitten. One of our cats had kittens, and I would always play with them...McGee we've had since I was a teenager. He's about probably like 6 now. He's very attached to me. If I pick him up, he instantly curls up in my neck On my shoulder. He'll climb up on my shoulder until he can't go anymore.*

One participant described that although she did not have a cat in her household, she enjoyed spending time with a friend's cat:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *One of my friends here has a cat, and whenever I feel really shitty, I always go see that cat, and I always feel better.*

### **Horses and Farm Animals**

Horses are reported to share the same protective stereotypical bond with humans as do dogs and cats (Sevillano & Flake, 2016). However none of the participants in this study reported having had horses as part of their households. Alex was the only participant to have had exposure to horses along with livestock and exotic animals during his upbringing as he grew up on a farm in a rural community:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *...I had everything you could probably think of other than llamas and probably peacocks. I had chickens and ducks and horses and sheep and cattle and rabbits.*

As a first year veterinary student at the time of this interview, Alex relayed how his farm experiences and familiarity with large animals have impacted his comfort level:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *Yeah, I grew up with everything that I've handled out of New Bolton (veterinary training site for large animals). So I know how to*



*restrain them, how to pet them and make them comfortable. I'm not afraid of them; I feel like a lot of veterinary students are afraid of large animals.*

## **Fish and Shellfish**

Five participants reported having had fish as children as often fish or crabs or looked upon societally as starter pets before having a larger animal that requires more care.

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *I had a fish.*

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I had some fish.*

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *I started out with the basics like fish.....*

*First memories, just like the goldfish from the fair. The beta fish that was a little more sturdy than the one from the fair. I think that one was named like Blue or something very lame.*

David (24 year old transmale):.....*a couple fish — they always died though.*

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *I've had in my lifetime.....two hermit crabs.*

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *I personally had a fish and a hermit crab.*

Molly, who was living as a student in an apartment, reported having fish now for that same reason of not requiring much space or care:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *Yeah I have two...two fish.*

## **Birds**

Besides Alex having had reported that he had ducks and chickens on his ancestral farm, two other participants noted having had birds in their households:

David (24 year old transmale): *a couple birds*

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *A canary....but when I got the canary for the first time, I remember because it was my great uncles, he bred birds, so we went down to Maryland to pick out our favorite birds, and I picked Rocky, which was his name now — well he died. so i remember that very distinctively because on the ride back, this bird would not stop singing, and I was trying to sleep, and I was like oh my gosh, what did we get ourselves into? But then he ended up being of my favorite pets.*

## **Rodents**

A total of six participants reported having had pet rodents in their households though never to the exclusion of other companion animals. Hamsters were commonly reported as early pets:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *We started with hamsters when I was really young.*

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *And hamsters throughout my entire upbringing.*

Molly (21 bisexual female): *And then for one birthday, my mom got me two cages. She got me a bird cage and a hamster cage, and I had to pick one or the other. And so I picked the hamster. And then that was Cinnamon. She was a Chinese dwarf hamster. Immediately after, I was in love with this hamster, like the next day my brother wanted one. So then he got Sparky. And Sparky was mean and bit everybody. But*

*Cinnamon was so nice. She would just like sit on your shoulder or cuddle up in your lap and just sit out with you all day. She was to this day the best hamster that I know of.*

Three participants reported having had guinea pigs in their households:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *My guinea pig lived a long time.*

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I had a guinea pig.*

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *three guinea pigs....the guinea pigs died.*

One participant reported having a guinea pig in her apartment at the present:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *Mo. Yeah his name was Mohawk. I adopted him from a shelter. And I just shortened it to Mo; he has a lot of nicknames.*

In addition to hamsters and guinea pigs, one participant reported having had a different rodent in her household:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *And then a couple of years ago, I had a pet rat (Cas-Cas). He was amazing too — rats, they're super sweet.*

## **Reptiles & Amphibians**

The final category of companion animals reported in the interviews was reptiles and amphibians. While not present as the primary pet for any of the participants, three reported having had a variety of these companions:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *I had....frogs, lizards, turtles.*

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *two snakes, and a lizard, and a frog...My brother had a turtle but he neglected it and it died, and that was Turtley,*

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *two turtles....I don't remember getting my turtles because I had them when I was really small until the time I was 15. The turtles we gave away because they would have — my ex-girlfriend, her little brother was really obsessed with turtles, so we gave him the turtles.*

More recently, one participant recalled having had snakes while living at college:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *Yeah, my roommate kicked the snakes out of the house because they were like 'oh our landlord is going to come see them'. I'm like he hasn't been here in seven months. They're like 'oh I'm scared the snakes are going to eat me'. I'm like really?!*

## **People in Household**

In addition to pets in one's household, I asked details about what other people had resided in their homes during their youth. The participants reported Siblings and Cousins as well as Divorced or Separated Parents in this section.

## **Siblings & Cousins**

I asked participants who besides pets lived in their households when they grew up. I received a mix of responses regarding having siblings that lived with them:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *Just one (sister). She is sixteen or seventeen now.*

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *Just me and my brother.*

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *I have one little brother and one little sister.*

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *So I have one sister and six step siblings. Three of whom I lived with...we had one girl in each grade of high school.*

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *Yeah, she's my twin. Have a little sister too.*

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *Yes. I have a sister and a brother. They're both older.*

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *Yeah, she's (sister) three years older than me.*

The other three participants reported growing up as the only child in the household. However to various extents they had cousins who were relatively close in age during their adolescence:

James (26 year old gay male): *Yeah I have several cousins who are pretty close in age to me. On both sides.*

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I think one is three years older and the other is five years older.*

David (24 year old transmale): *The last time we've probably talked, I was probably ten. I was probably ten when I talked to them. Other than that they don't associate with us. Even my mom's brother doesn't really talk to her at all.*

### **Divorced or Separated Parents**

All participants reported having grown up with at least one parent. A theme among several was having divorced parents:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *I had a great family until my freshman or sophomore year of high school, when my parents started to divorce...My parents were divorced at that time.*

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *Because like my parents divorced when I was really young. I'm not as close to him (father).*

Or living with parents who are facing divorce:

Molly (21 bisexual female): *They're at the stage before being divorced, but they're just still together for college and reasons.*

David (24 year old transmale) reported having being raised solely by his mother but he did not elaborate on any parental marital events. The two participants who shared that their parents divorced during their respective childhoods, also reported having blended families that impacted their adolescence. Neither stated a close bond with their step-siblings at that time:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *He (father) had cheated and had an out of wedlock child, and claimed that God was telling him to do all of this. And that's when I really put down the Kool-Aid cup at 15. That's when I started to grow a lot faster...I see her when I have to. She's six.*

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *They're spread out over a lot of years. So I have a younger step-brother and two older step-sisters who I lived with throughout. They moved in the summer before high school.....With my step-siblings, it was not great. My step sister that I had to share a room with, because of all the complications early on in high school, with not having that person to confide in. I originally was going to an all girls' private Catholic school, and the whole situation happened, and I had to switch to the public school.....so in the home she was perfectly nice to me. But as soon as we went to school it was completely opposite, so I felt like she was putting on faces and my mom couldn't see that and neither could my step-dad.*

Keri continued to tell of her step-brother and other step-sister whom lived with her in the same household:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *My step-brother and I...I was never used to having a boy in the house in general.....Especially when he was younger, there was a lot going on there, but I never felt really support or anything from him. We weren't close. And my older step-sister resented my mother a lot. Because of blending a family, I also wasn't close with her in high school.*

Neither Keri nor Alex reported having felt the same level of closeness between them and their step-siblings in comparison to their bonds with their biological siblings. The overall bond with parents and siblings for all participants is explored further in the latter sections of this dissertation regarding Human Support and Family Homophobia.

## Chapter 6: Sexual Development

In each interview, I asked the participant to describe their sexual development regarding what it was like to be LGBT+ in their adolescence. As the previous questions had helped to determine a description of both the human and animals in each person's household, each participant relayed that they lived with companion animals during their adolescence. Numerous features of this period of development unfolded in the interview, but in particular I also asked how companion animals impacted each participant's sexual development. This chapter includes the themes of Realizing Self Difference, Confusion, Learning about Sexuality on the Internet, Cyber Support, Animal Support during Sexual Development, Exploring Identity, and Dating. Confusion is a standard stage of sexual development (Cass, 1979), and along with feelings of isolation, appeared in common throughout the participants' experiences:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *Well growing up I lived in (Northern town), New Jersey, which is very traditional. So I guess I really didn't explore sexuality at all going up because I felt like I was the only gay person there.*

James (26 year old gay male): *Sorry that's a tough one to answer. I don't really know. I don't really have — I don't feel like I had a typical experience in anyway, or anything. Well it's not really much of note, I suppose....I kind of wrote it off I guess as being a 16 year old boy and not, and really didn't think too much of it.*

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *Well the general answer is*



*that it was kind of difficult and it wasn't really something I came to terms with until actually kind of recently.....I think I repressed it for so long. Like I said, I definitely had feelings toward other girls.*

Alex (22 year old gay male): *I thought that if you were gay you had to move to New York or San Francisco to be safe.*

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *I think early elementary schoolish era, I was like very boy crazy, and my mom was very like oh like would kind of like feed into it. Oh do you like this boy, do you like this boy, just kind of like forcing that, and then I was like kind of like flirting, talking to this one boy in high school, and he said he was bisexual, and I remember feeling like that's weird. Like I don't understand that.*

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *(U)nderstanding my sexuality and understanding queer community in general started with my woman and gender studies course. And that was when it grew more to me being like oh okay, maybe I can explore that.*

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *Well, I came from a very conservative background so a lot of my sexual development in my youth was a lot of repression.....It was just like a lot of trying to navigate that I was gay while also coming from a conservative background and trying to reconcile both of them.*

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *Yeah I didn't really develop sexually until I was a little older. I was kind of a prude. I was raised religiously, so I didn't really get too active until probably college years.*

David (24 year old transmale): *Hard.....my friend I grew up with in middle school in Philly had a friend that lived in Denver, and they would talk on the phone. And we did a three way call one night and she was like 'I like your voice', or something like that and we started texting. And at the time I didn't know I like females or anything like that. And went to bed on the phone, and woke up, I had a girlfriend! I was like okay — I was like it's just a vagina. So I figured I liked women.*

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *I remember immediately being attracted to men, which wasn't something that concerned me too much at the time. And then going through I guess middle school/ high school, it was a very personal thing that I was dealing with.*

### **Realizing Self-Difference**

The participants realized that they were not heterosexual at different ages and at various periods of their lives. For some they were able to come out to themselves at that point despite the confusion. Other people shared their own mental attempts to rationalize their attractions:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *I knew that I was gay from an early age. I watched Disney movies, and I didn't understand why the prince wanted to kiss the princess. I didn't really understand why boys were dating girls in school. I even questioned my parents' relationship, even though it was normal and it was all I knew. I grew up in a small town with very close-minded people.*

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *I think early on around 5th grade, I had probably my first experience being attracted to another girl. But then it wasn't until like senior year of college where I felt like really strongly that I had to actually say something about it. And I kind of denied it for a while. I saw a therapist here at Penn, talked about it with her and um yeah then came out my first year of veterinary school.*

James (26 year old gay male): *I think it kind of started back in high school. I would peg it around 16. I started to maybe question it. But I didn't really think anything of it.*

Jay (23 year old gay male): *Probably like late middle school or early high school. When I just like had this insane crush on this one guy in class, and I was like he's a guy! And I was like oh wait. There's nothing wrong with that, so I guess at that point. But I also had weird, conflicting feelings for a female. And I wasn't sure what to do. But in the end I essentially reasoned to myself that if I really felt strongly to myself about the female, I would have pursued it because there's no stigma about being straight.*

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *And then I got to school here and the first crush that I had was this girl on my team. And I was like, oh my God she's beautiful! She's gorgeous! She was a senior and I was a freshman (college). I'm like I just want to be her and make out with her, and everything, like this is awesome. But I still think like at that time I was like year no I'm straight. Everything's like just what it was before, I just think this girl is attractive. Then I*

*guess the summer after my freshman year, I kind of like completely accepted it. I was like, yeah no, I'm bisexual. But I still like guys.*

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *Yeah, so I officially didn't come out until I was in college. But I was experiencing the feelings for being attracted to women when I was in high school, and well earlier than that really if I look back on it. But in high school I had a friend that came out to me as Bi and she asked me basically to tag along because her foster mom didn't want her like to —didn't trust her with certain people, but she trusted me. And so I would tag along to go with her to see this girl she was like interested in, and then ended up falling around with her after. And that's like where everything started and I was like whaaat?*

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *So I would say like 12. Because I distinctly remember writing in my diary being like 'oh my gymnastic instructor is so cute'. She's so nice, but I'm not a lesbian. And that's when I knew. When you have to write that, that's when you know, like you're thinking that. I think that was then I was thinking that like 'oh no'!*

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *Pretty young. But I don't think I knew it was big deal or that it was—I wouldn't say not normal, but not traditional I guess. Like I would have crushes on some of the girls at my school, at my elementary school, and on TV. But I would just think they were a woman crush, and that I just wanted to be their friend or something, but it wasn't like that.*

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *I remember immediately being attracted to men, which wasn't something that concerned me too much at the time. And then going*

*through I guess middle school/ high school, it was a very personal thing that I was dealing with.*

## **Confusion**

Even though one may realize that they are not heterosexual, confusion about one's orientation is common (Cass, 1979). Heterosexual images bombard all members of society and the expectation is that one is straight. Recognizing different feelings can lead to uncertainty and self-questioning:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *Huh, I don't know. I think I repressed it for so long. Like I said, I definitely had feelings towards other girls. A lot of my — not a lot — but a few of my very close friends. I was like oh I want to spend time with them more than they want to spend time with me. And then it wasn't until I got here in the city where I actually started exploring it and meeting up and going on dates with girls So I don't know how I learned about it. I think I knew deep down it was kind of different. But I don't think I admitted it. And I was kind of just like oh yeah you know I'm heterosexual.*

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *It was just like a lot of trying to navigate that I was gay while also coming from a conservative background and trying to reconcile both of them. I hated myself! Yeah — I feel like if I was in a different circumstance I probably wouldn't have. Like if I had a more accepting family. I grew up hearing about sexuality is a sin, sexuality is a choice; it's demonic, etc. I was like internalizing all these things that I had been hearing, and so I think a lot of it turned to self hate.*

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *I don't think I like admitted to myself until after high school that I wasn't straight.*

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *So even growing up it's not like the certain parts of my sexuality. Yes I wrestled with it for a long time, like praying that it would change. Is it right? Is it wrong? Largely throughout my sexual development I was kind of comfortable with who I was.*

### **Learning about Sexuality on the Internet**

Participants shared different ways that they learned about their sexuality.

Alex (22 year old gay male): *The internet. Pretty much.*

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *I would honestly go on the internet a lot and be like 'what is this?' 'What does this mean?' And then I found like, not like the queer main characters, but there would be books with a queer character, even if it was a side character, that I would be like I have to research more.. That's what I started doing, like Googling A lot of internet reading. A lot of Youtubes now that I think about it...I don't know if you remember the show Pretty Little Liars, but there was a gay girl on that show. Her name was Emily. I remember connecting to her so much. I was like yes I love her and then all of my friends were like I don't understand, she's gay. And I was like who cares. She's still great! It's because she was gay that I connected with her. It was really nice to see. I remember the first time I saw a girl kiss another girl on the television. I was like I could not stop staring at it. I was like oh my goodness this is great!*

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *I had gone on the internet to chat rooms and other stuff like that, and spoke to gay men that way.*

Keri ( 25 year old lesbian): *Which included videos. And honestly one of the best things that I ever saw was 'For the bible tells me so', the documentary. Which talks a lot about — it's basically all about these individuals who are queer, are in the community, and their families were very religious.*

## **Cyber Support**

A brief mention of cyber support is merited as technology has enabled youth to contact others from around the world in ways not possible for previous generations. Certainly drawbacks exist for cyber support; there is an impersonal and often anonymous feature of 'speaking' with someone else online and typing text is not the same as an actual in- person conversation. Contrary to animal support, seeking help through the internet also does not fulfill any physical comfort needs. The internet provided some participants a chance to learn more about their sexuality in a physically safe environment. Mathew reported that he reached out online to learn more about his sexual orientation:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *I had gone on the internet to chat rooms and other stuff like that, and spoke to gay men that way.*

This same sentiment about learning from the internet about sexuality was shared by Natalie:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *I would honestly go on the internet a lot and be like what is this, what does this mean. And then I found like, not like the queer main*

*characters, but there would be books with a queer character, even if it was a side character, that I would be like I have to research more. That's what I started doing, like Googling. A lot of internet, a lot of reading .A lot of Youtubers now that I think about it.*

Alex, who was living in a rural community at the time, answered how he was able to learn and reach out to other LGBT+ people:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *The internet. Pretty much.*

Because he commonly used the internet around LGBT+ issues, his mother used his alleged activity in an accusation once:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *My mom and I had a fight one time, and she said something very absurd that I can hardly remember. She implied that.. I was young and had just started driving, and she had implied that I was trying to meet strange men on the internet. And I said that was ridiculous, and I was with one of my two close friends at all times. And I was excited that I had just got my license. And then I cried and I left the house. I stormed out.*

Molly recollected how she used social media to express herself. She gave a poignant example that referenced her connection with her animals:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *I actually have one of my old Facebook profile pictures is me with my dog and it says like the more people I meet, the more I love my dog.*

### **Animal Support during Sexual Development**



Every participant included their companion animals as being part of their support system during their youth and sexual development. As part of the study's inclusion criteria was to have had a lifelong strong relationship with pets, this was not surprising. Simple responses started with emphatic agreement that animals were a support during this time:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *Yes.*

Jay (23 year old gay male): *Yes!*

James (26 year old gay male): *Yeah absolutely.*

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *Yeah.*

Through probing, several participants shared much greater detail about the support they received from their animals and the perceived quality of their relationships. Keri told about relying on her dogs for support during her sexual development:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *Sometimes I would go and snuggle with her and talk to her about my day. Because I didn't feel like I really had anyone else I could really tell what was going on.... I think Hayley helped me to come to realize that I could. It felt like I could be okay on my own, is part of what she gave me. Even at the young age of thirteen. It's part of what I think I learned from her the most. And then Brassy was like you can be whatever you want. Hats just like her attitude. I kind of just always felt that way around her. And I think in building a relationship and being able to be with Brassy, it helped me feel more confident with my real self out in the world, which is part of the reason I would go with her, because I could be out in the world and be myself.*

She further elaborated on the areas that having a dog as a support helped her to develop:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *I think it helped me to open up to more people sometimes. Even if I never... throughout that whole time, not having a consistent person that I could ...went to... sometimes I would say something or be talking about something or crying like whatever to my dog and I would be like I need to actually talk about this with someone who can actually give me a little bit back, verbally. And so then that's like when I would be like okay I realized that's actually something I need to process. And then would bring it to someone. Often I jumped around different people. Which is why I think like I said I didn't have one person because as much as I didn't have necessarily a set support system, I did always feel like I had support in some way. I found a way to find support basically.*

Keri also addressed how she would find support from her dog when she began dating later into her sexual development:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *When I was going through the stage... now I'm not official, but exclusive with someone and when I was going through the dating stage with different people I would bounce off my sexuality with him too. And that has I don't know it always opened up the floor like oh yeah I'm going to go to Emily about this now. And now I'm able to more easily talk with other people about everything.*

Natalie had previously revealed that she did not have adequate human support during her adolescence. She then spoke about support from her dog Rex from that time and how she came out to him:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *And then with Rex, who was the first dog that I ever had, he is my favorite. He was my favorite being in the whole world.... I told my dog I was gay. I came out to my dog. I was like Rex, I'm gay. He was... He obviously didn't respond. But I was like okay, cool, I did it.... And I have distinct memories of crying in my room hugging my dog while I'm processing the fact that I'm gay.*

Coming out to her companion animals was also an experience shared by Molly, though she relied on their support for many issues:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *I kind of explained to them my situation. Kind of trying to figure out why my parents are fighting or tell them... I made sure I came out to Molly too. Just oh by the way this is happening too, this is school, this is my life, how sports are going. Just kind of kind of what you would do at the end of the day, sit down and say everything that had happened.*

Mathew could not recall the exact context but told how he did turn to his dog Shira for support in his youth:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *I can remember crying by her and talking to her. but I have no ideas of what it was about or what I was saying to her.*

## Exploring Identity

After having realized their sexual differences and facing confusion, experimentation or exploration presented as common journeys for participants. Keri offered the following as an example from her college years:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *And then knowing that I was attracted to women but not really having any of those experiences, because I was still entrenched in the like — I was still in the sorority and so it was heterosexual and heterosexism everywhere. ‘Who do you hook up with?’ like ‘one of the frat boys’. Like that just happened. So I still wasn’t really getting any of those experiences because at that point I still didn’t know my sophomore year didn’t know anyone like within the queer community. And then I met someone and she was in an open relationship with a guy, but she identifies as bi. And was like oh but we don’t have to do anything with him, but we can do something. And I was like okay cool. And so then experienced stuff with her, I was like oh okay yeah this is definitely what I like.*

Sara Katherine reported experimenting to address her initial confusion:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *I was able to actually find people to go on dates with and actually try to do things with girls and meet up with them. I realize that oh I like this, like this makes sense.*

## Dating

For several participants, moving beyond exploring to dating someone congruent with their sexual orientation was the next progressive step in their sexual development. Seeing

someone on a date with a romantic intent helped some participants move towards accepting their own sexuality and gave a reason and opportunity to discuss this with others:

Jay (23 year old gay male): ....*I would use the 'he' pronoun when I would talk about people I was seeing....*

Regarding speaking with his father about his sexuality and dating for the first time, Jay continued with the following:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *Well he asked me why I didn't have a girlfriend. I was like I don't. I think I was complaining about my mom constantly asking when are you going to get a girlfriend, when are you going to do this, are you not interested in girls? So my dad asked the same questions. And I was like honestly dad, I'm gay.....He was just like yeah so do you have a boyfriend? It was really calm. Then he asked me oh, he asked me about my ex. Because my ex and I were really close, obviously. And he was like, oh so is he more than just your friend? And I was like yeah, of course. But he also was like oh I've had a feeling, because you haven't had a girlfriend. Then he was like do you want me to tell your mom? And I was like I'd rather not because she's just a hypocrite.*

Jay then clarified the timing of his first dating relationship:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I met my ex freshman year of college. We started dating at the end of freshman year, broke up right before junior year of college.*

Alex recently started a serious relationship and used his dating status to formally come out to his mother although he suspected she already knew that he was gay:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *My parents and I — it was just understood. I never had girlfriends. I dropped hints. I never really came out to anybody. It was all*

*implied and if anybody asked the question, I would just nod my head or say yes. I did just tell my mom about two weeks ago or something that I'm dating somebody here for the first time. And she reacted perfectly fine.*

He continued to demonstrate that discussing with others the fact that he has a boyfriend served to reveal his sexual orientation early with new acquaintances:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *Yes. I started dating somebody before school started. So whenever I meet people, the conversation moves fast, especially in my program (veterinary school), because we don't just want to talk about school constantly. And one of the things I say is that I have a boyfriend. So I guess that's been implied to other people.*

Mathew discussed a same sex relationship that he had in college. He had recently broken up with his boyfriend but it served as a way to discuss his sexual orientation with his mother. However his ex-boyfriend also had decided to speak with Mathew's mother:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *So I told my mother that I that, and then I had broken up with the guy that I was seeing at the time, who was an alcoholic, and I think a little bit of a drug addict. And after we had broken up, he wound up calling my mother and telling that we had been in a relationship for 8 to 9 months. So that was kind of like a second outing.*

Natalie shared how answering questions about her dating status also gives her a chance to come out as a lesbian:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *'So do you have a boyfriend?' I'm like 'I'm super gay, no I don't!' It's little thinks like that. Know what I mean?*

Not being in a long-term relationship with another woman yet, Sara Katharine concurrently has not explicitly discussed with her parents that she identifies as bisexual. She told that in other discussions with her mother, she has felt judgement and her mother's need for control. But ultimately, she would like to share her true self:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *I think if it was gonna be a concrete discussion, it would have to be probably if I was like in a serious relationship with a woman, with them. And they're kind of weird about it, I don't know. They go back and forth between like she has very set expectations of how she wants my life to go so when I bring up stuff like this, it's like she kind of takes it personally and is like, 'but I want you to be happy', and 'this is how I want you to be happy'. It's difficult. It's difficult, but I know that if she saw that I was happy with somebody she would ultimately be really happy for me.*

Cynthia has not discussed her dating life with her parents though she has with others:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual woman): *I try to keep my dating life private from them. I definitely mention boys sometimes to my mom if I'm like having an issue or something with a boy, and she'll like get involved, and all oooh about it. But for all they know, I could still be a virgin. They don't know my life about that...(with others) I'm pretty open about it. I have a dating profile that says that I am.*

Dating can also be anxiety and concern about how one appears. David mentioned how he turns to his companion animal at these times:

David (24 year old transmale): *Like if I have a date or something. I'll talk to the cat, like 'hey do I look good' or something. And if they meow, then it's good. And*

*I'm like okay I can do this. If they don't, then I have to change, find something else. I probably look horrible.*

## **Chapter 7: Bonds with Companion Animals**

The bonds between the participants and their companion animals were paramount to each interview and to the overall study. My inclusion criteria included that participants would have to had a self-identified close relationship with pets during their lifetime. In each interview, I asked participants questions about their past and present pets and examined the nature and perceived quality of their relationships. Themes of this chapter are Lifelong Love of Animals, Physical Comfort from Pets, Animals as Intuitive of Emotions, Empathy with Animals, Illness & Death, Talking to Animals and specifically Talking for Directions, Play talk, and Talking for Emotions.

### **Lifelong Love of Animals**

Through my career as a social worker and animal enthusiast, I have seen how easily many people will enthusiastically talk about their animals even if they exhibit reserved introverted demeanor when speaking about other issues. The study participants also freely spoke



about their lifelong bonds with animals and each person universally expressed joy at reporting this feature of their lives:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *We had so many animals. We just added more after we moved to the farm. But yeah he (Farley, the dog) was always the most energetic or rambunctious one. He was the one that was the most fun. We had adopted other animals and puppies and kittens, but has probably my favorite.*

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *Yeah, I had a handful of animals....Yeah, yup. And I hope to have a lot more pets.*

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I've always loved animals. Since the day ever since I can actually remember. I've always loved animals. I've always loved renting books out from the library about animals. I always loved the zoo. So my relationship with animals has been pretty consistent. It's been pretty strong and pretty solid since I can remember.*

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *I'm an animal person. I'm looking to go to vet school in the near future. So I just don't really like people. I don't like social situations. I get so much more pleasure from animals and from knowing them and understanding them and learning about them.*

David (24 year old transmute): *I've had pets since I was a baby. I love pets. Probably because they don't speak English, so they can't judge you. I don't know, animals always seemed to like me, and I've always liked them. I don't really know it's just like we have a connection I guess. Because they're different too, you know.*

After establishing a lifelong connection with companion animals, I asked participants to more fully explain their bond with their animals. Alex, who had grown up on a farm surrounded by animals, spoke about the present and the companion animals in his family household:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *Yes, yes. We used to have even more dogs and cats. And I felt like it was hard to be close with all of them. But I feel like even five pets; five pets is a good number.*

Jay told of his present closeness with his family dogs that he misses seeing everyday as he was living away from home while at medical school in Philadelphia:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I don't know. I guess we were just really close. I don't know if that's weird to say that I'm really close to dogs.*

Regarding a close bond with her dogs, Cynthia shared her relationship:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *And they're like my life. I'm obsessed with them.....It's better for me to not work with people and to work with dogs instead. Because they do just bring out like a happy — they're just happy and playful and cuddly. They have no negative traits, you know.*

Though most of the participants told of their connections with dogs, David spoke about his bond especially with cats:

David (24 year old transmale): *I think I bond more with cats. They always seem to just come up and lay next to me. I just wind up hugging them.*

Mathew provided a simple response to answer if he had a bond with companion animals:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *Yeah. Super close.*

## **Physical Comfort from Animals**

Sometimes the simple act of holding, petting, or touching a companion animal provided comfort for participants. Stimulation from having a tactile bond with another living being arose as another theme from interviews. Alex spoke about this type of bond and the benefits that he felt from it:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *...I did get comfort out of touching them and holding them and the affection that they offered. And it would make me feel better and drive depression away temporarily.*

When Alex visits his mother's home back in rural Pennsylvania, he mentioned the physical comfort from the household animals:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *They're usually all sitting on my lap at once and I just watch TV when I'm home. There's not much to do there. So I spend a lot of time. I'll play fetch with the younger dog and brush all of the cats. And they like it.*

Sara Katherine shared the physical comfort from her dog Maggie:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *We snuggled a lot..... But Maggie's a lot more playful, and I don't want to say selfish, but she's like just throw the ball. I want to play with the ball....and I love Maggie. She's adorable.*

She added another physical benefit of being with Maggie:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *Someone to pet and like kind of a distraction from stuff.*

James spoke about his physical bond with his late dog Venus:

James (26 year old gay male): *It was more just wanting to sit with her and be*

*with her. She was not really a cuddler per say, as much as I would have like her to be. She always sat sort of at arm's length, just out of reach, as they do. Close enough to let you know yes, I'm here but I don't necessarily want to be touched. But she would let me pet her and she never bit or did anything, anything nasty or anything like that. She didn't necessarily want to be touched, but she didn't voice it in that way. But she would be with you. It was just nice to know that you have that.*

The physical act of walking with Venus brought pleasant memories for James:

*James (26 year old gay male): I grew to enjoy taking her for walks. She was not really good on the leash, but I didn't like doing that. It got us out of the house. Got us a little fresh air. And we could just walk. I could think. She could do whatever she needed to do. Sniff and be a pain (he smiled).*

James spoke also about his current time dog-sitting for his family's dogs when his parents are out of town. He offered the following description of the two:

*James (26 year old gay male): She's (Dixie) very sweet and very energetic. And the other one (Jeffrey) is very sweet and he's a bum, frankly. He like nothing more than to just sit on your foot.*

Mathew commented on the physical presence of a dog:

*Mathew (24 year old gay male): He's fun. I like having a dog around, you know. You can play with him.*

The physical comfort of having a companion animals was not solely relegated to dogs.

David shared his view on his cats:

*David (24 year old transmale): I think I bond more with cats. They always*

*seem to just come up and lay next to me. I just wind up hugging them.*

### **Animals as Intuitive of Emotions**

Throughout the interviews, participants shared accounts of how their companion animals were attuned to their emotions. The animals were described as being able to read the participants' moods and provided support without being asked. These descriptions offered a post-modern viewpoint of animals as intuitive beings. James gave an example of the comfort that he can get from his dogs without speaking a word to them:

James (26 year old gay male): *One night when I was dog sitting, I had one of my friends over, someone I'm very close with. Ad she came over, and I was talking about a lot of things, and I've been having some trouble, and we were just sitting down in the basement, and the basket case one, Dixie, she jumped up on the couch and kind of snuggled up and laid her head on my lap and as we were talking. We were just both sitting there petting her.*

I probed a bit further on this subject and asked James if his dogs were able to read his emotions:

James (26 year old gay male): *Yeah, I think so. Of course I don't know to what extent. Yeah I think that they could. They knew when something's wrong. They absolutely know. Whether it's with me, or my parents, or the other dog, they know. You can maybe not see it on their face, but in the way that they're looking or the way that they're carrying themselves. Or just kind of looking around at things. They know that something is up. Right when Venus really started to get bad, we had another dog that we adopted. And she was a senior dog, and she*

*had to be put down also because she was really ailing. And they were talking exploratory surgery and all this other stuff, and she wasn't going to make it through it. So we took her. And we came back that day, and Venus had started having more complications with the diabetes, with her eyes. But she knew. She didn't even have to necessarily see us clearly, she could tell as soon as we all came in the door that there was something up. And that we were all sad. She came over and did her comforting thing. And Jeffrey does it too. And Dixie does it to her own extent. But they know, absolutely.*

Jay spoke about his view on animal intuition and particularly about his dog Cherry:

*Jay (23 year old gay male): I feel like dogs are some of those creatures that just know if something's wrong or something's off, especially Cherry.... I think I instantly for some reason had this weird connection with Cherry, and she had this weird connection with me. Because I'm the only person she will ever listen to. I'm the only person that if I say something to her, she will either do it if I tell her to do it, or not do it if I tell her not to.*

In agreement with animals showing emotion and being connected with specific humans, Molly shared her observation about her family dog who is not with her daily as she was in college:

*Molly (21 year old bisexual female): So I know that without me there, she's very unhappy.*

Molly then offered her perspective on animals being responsive to human emotion:

*Molly (21 year old bisexual female): As someone who's in bio (college major), I understand that reptiles and amphibians don't really have what we define as*

*emotions. They have learned behaviors. The frog knows when I get close to the tank that she'll probably get fed. The snakes know that if something moves on top of the cage, then they're going to get fed. So yeah, they do like me and will sit with me. I know that they're just kind of like 'food'. That's their thought process. But the cat knows that if I come home, lay on the bed, and ignore him, that it probably isn't a good day. So he just will sit there next to me. And more often than not, he ignores me. But he does like to cuddle up and he will let me just hang out with him if I'm sad. So he is good about that.*

Natalie shared this sentiment on the subject regarding her dog:

*Natalie (20 year old lesbian): He is very well attuned to my emotions. So he knows what I need when I need it.*

### **Empathy with Animals**

In addition to speaking about animals' intuitiveness, participants described their empathetic bonds with animals in a variety of contexts. Alex, a first year veterinary student, told about working with larger farm animals that often intimidated his classmates:

*Alex (22 year old gay male): Yeah, I grew up with everything that I've handled out of New Bolton (large animal campus of Penn Vet). So I know how to restrain them, but how to pet them and make them comfortable. I'm not afraid of them. I feel like a lot of veterinary students are afraid of large animals. A lot of them just want to do cats and dogs. If you're uncomfortable, the animal knows you're uncomfortable and then they're more likely to react. Especially a cow or a horse, anything bigger than a dog or a cat. Even a chicken.*

The other veterinary student in this study shared her view on animal empathy:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *And I feel like in the veterinary profession now, I feel like it's really selfless. We don't get paid that much. We just want to help creatures and help people with their human animal bonds.*

Keri told of the empathic bond she shared with her dog Hayley:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *I always felt connected to her. At the time, in high school, I was a lot quieter than I am now and being more myself now. And I always related to her on that level because she was a quiet and slightly timid dog sometimes and I always felt like this was part of me.*

James spoke about how empathy towards his dog Venus affected his ability to feel for other's emotions:

James (26 year old gay male): *I feel like it made me more compassionate, and again, more realistic about a lot of things. Not just being a pet owner or a pet parent Really I watched her deteriorate and I watched her deteriorate quickly. And it was of course, it was not easy to see that. It was tough. And it's still not easy to think about it. But that kind of — it put a lot of things into perspective.*

Natalie offered her view on empathy with animals as it projected onto her bonding with fellow humans:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *I feel like just being a pet owner makes you a much more empathetic person, I feel like. So I feel like a lot of my ability to be responsible, and take care of people and just be empathetic has stemmed from my relationship with Rex, if that makes sense.*

## **Illness & Death**



Grieving losses from a loved one's illness, dying, or eventual death is a difficult process in general regardless of circumstances. When societal dismissal of the emotive grieving for a companion animal is compiled onto a person's process, a disenfranchisement may ensue. The previously reported bond between the participants and their animals helps to also understand worries about the animal's health and potential loss of life. Sara Katherine shared her own experiences with a beloved animal's untimely death and the fear for another's well-being:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *I cried so much when she died.... She got hit by a car and died when I was a sophomore in college. She was old. She was like twelve. So she was like kind of going blind and was deaf. And my brother forgot to hook her up on her rung in the back yard. And she just got out and got killed. Yeah my parents came to Delaware to tell me that she had died. But they waited to tell me until after my organic chemistry test, but they thought my organic chem test was the day before and I just yeah I flunked that test. But we got Maggie, Maggie we have now. She's like 13 and half English Shepard mix. I try to go home and see her when I can because she's really old. And I don't want her to die without me being there.*

James shared several experiences on illness and death. He told about the death of his family's first two dogs and how at his young age, he did not understand what had happened:

James (26 year old gay male): *I don't exactly remember what happened to them. They just kind of... I feel like I went for a nap one day, I woke up and they were gone. So I don't know if they... I don't remember. I think they might have been put to sleep. I think they actually went one at a time and I just don't remember that.*

He then spoke about the illness and death of his rescue dog named Venus:

James (26 year old gay male): *Because she was fine one day and then the next day she was really not all that fine. We were giving her insulin injections. You realize sometimes you have to make sacrifices for the ones that you love. As much as the vet liked said oh your world is not going to revolve around her diabetes, it did. We couldn't travel as a family, we couldn't...she had to be fed and injected at certain times. So it was kind of a rude awakening in some way: It's not all sunshine and roses when you have a pet. I guess I kind of thought that as a kid. I took a lot of it for granted....And she was a senior dog, and she had to be put down also because she was really ailing. And they were talking exploratory surgery and all this other stuff, and she wasn't going to make it through it. So we took her. And we came back that day, and Venus had started having more complication with the diabetes, with her eyes. But she knew.*

Some people endure disenfranchised grief when a loved human dies from a socially marginalized reason – examples include death by suicide, drug overdose, succumbing to a sexually transmitted disease, being executed in prison, etc. Suspected guilt for the cause of one's own death often leads to scrutiny by others in society and the sympathy or empathy that is often shared to the bereaved is muted. At times the death of a companion animal can also lead to disenfranchised grief. Keri shared her experience with her dog's euthanasia due to behavioral reasons and an attack on a neighbor's pet. This excerpt appeared earlier in the dissertation but also served as a strong example of the theme of coping with death:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *We got another dog and she ended up... we ended up having to put her down because the neighbor complained because she got out one day and the neighbor's dog was one of those tiny toy Chihuahuas.. And she was a*

*rescue dog and I'm pretty sure she thought it was a toy. But she didn't hurt the dog whatsoever, because she was also really gentle with her toys. She just picked it up like that. And the lady like freaked out. And then it happened a second it me. And same thing, no harm to the other dog, but because she was threatening, we had to put the dog down. Which sucked.*

*(Keri starts to tear up)*

This instance from Keri's interview was the first time in this study that I encountered a participant visibly crying. At this point I slowed the interview to allow Keri time to collect herself. She was able to continue with the interview without difficulty but her reaction with tears served to emphasize the lingering disenfranchised pain she still experienced from her dog's unanticipated euthanasia from years earlier. Several other participants became emotional when discussing their current animals' deteriorating health. These interviews showed a common feature in that an animal's illness had a bonding effect for the participant with family members that may not be supportive in other ways:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *Molly (her dog) was just diagnosed with diabetes. And she's only like... she's not even ten years old yeah.. But it definitely makes me want to go home more and see them. Yeah for sure....She actually just found out that she also has cataracts so she can't really see. A lot of the times when I do talk to my mom it's like about their health, especially with my sister. My sister's a vet tech. so she has all the answers to the questions that they have. It gets scary as they get older. They're still like very playful and stuff, so we're lucky. But a lot of our conversations are based around them now that I think about it.*

Jay expressed his concern for the health of his dog Cherry. As a medical student, he includes a diagnostic view along with his notice of Cherry's behavioral changes:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *She's always this ball of energy except for when she gets this weird pain. I don't know if it's her back or her back legs, but she does this really like... it's the most depressing thing ever. And the whole energy in the house just drops. It's so sad. I'm assuming it's pain, and I talked to the vet about it, but the vet doesn't know, because there's no like nodule. There's nothing you can palpate on her. And there's nothing that she retracts to. There's no area on her body that if I touch it, she's going to pull away. So it's clearly nothing chronic because it's not an ongoing thing. But she has these acute episodes of lethargy. She just kind of won't move. She won't move to go to the bathroom. So I would literally have to pick her up, hold her outside for her to go to the bathroom. She loves eating, she loves food. Every time someone walks in to the kitchen, she'll be in the kitchen too. Anytime she hears the dog cabinet open, she'll be like oh treat? She'll be right there. But when she has these episodes, she doesn't move at all. She will literally just hide in the closet the whole time, not make a single noise, doesn't do anything. She's not excitable.*

He continued to discuss Cherry's mysterious health condition and how his mother shares his concerns. Throughout most of the interview, Jay had spoken with frustration regarding his mother and her constant judgement of him. The shared worry for Cherry was a unique bond that he and both of his parents had in common:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *Nothing starts it. Just randomly she'll just stop moving. And then she'll hide in the closet. And she will sleep in the closet sometimes, which I think is hilarious that she sleeps in the closet. It's very ironic. so she often does sleep in the closet, but she'll come out if there's someone in the kitchen. But when she has this pain, like nothing starts it. She can't climb stairs. She can't do anything. And the vet even was like I have no idea. He gave us pain killers for her. And the pain killers did work. And it's awesome because we give her a pain killer and she's back to herself in an hour, which is awesome because the mood instantly raises in the house. Even my parents, well more my dad than my mom... my mom feels really bad for her when it happens, but she doesn't really talk about it. I think she really cares for Cherry, as much as she doesn't want to admit it. But my dad is always like I hate when this happens. And then I'm like why. And he's like well the house always just feels dead, which is actually the best way to describe it.*

Regarding the unifying power of Cherry felt especially in its absence when she is in pain, Jay described the difference between Cherry's affect on the household versus that of the other concurrent household dog:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *Sparky (the other dog) doesn't bring life to the house because he mostly just sits there, and kind of just looks around, guarding. He's like this little guard dog. He's like 20 pounds, but he thinks he's like 100. But Cherry's the one that brings the energy and brings life to the house. Even if I take her to the groomer or the vet, the energy dies in the house. So it's like she needs*

*to keep her energy up for the whole house to keep its energy up, which is kind of interesting.*

### **Talking to animals**

Some participants had described talking to their animals as previously mentioned in this dissertation. Focusing more closely on this behavior, the action of talking to animals is examined on three different levels: Talking for Directions, Play Talk, and Talking for Emotions. Interviews provided examples of each type of speech.

### **Talking for Directions**

While many participants spoke about giving verbal directions to their animals at various times, several noted that this task-oriented talking was the only speech that they shared with their animals. Alex recollected about his upbringing on a farm with multiple animals:

*Alex (22 year old gay male): We talked to the animals like they were other people in the room. We asked them if they were hungry. I didn't do a lot of baby talk that people do with their pets. it was always in a monotone voice. Asked them if they wanted to go for a walk. He's very obedient. If you took him outside of our fence and into our woods, we had 100 acres, he had no training, and we let him in with cattle and sheep and he didn't harm them. He herded them right into the barn and then came over to us. Like a job well done.*

While Mathew sought out his dog Shira for emotional comfort, his speech to her was limited to task oriented directions. He confirmed that he spoke with her but did not elaborate further than directive speech:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *Did I? Yeah.*

In contrast, Jay spoke to his dogs on multiple levels. He did give an example of directive style speech regarding his overall connection with her:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I tell her not to eat and she won't.*

### **Play Talk**

Talking for play or as Alex described it “baby talk” was commonly reported by the participants. Sara Katherine shared that her speech with her emotional support guinea pig was mostly this type of speech:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *Mostly I just tell him how cute he is. I don't really have deep meaningful conversations with him. But I'll be like 'alright Mo, I'm going to school. I'll see you later...I'm gonna go take a shower....it's time to vacuum, don't be scared.' I don't know. Yeah I don't really talk to him like I talked to my dogs growing up. But I mean I sometimes I could?*

James recalled examples of play talk with his dog Venus:

James (26 year old gay male): *I'm trying to remember now. I always, I guess because I'm an only child. I always talked to myself. And I always just would have conversations with her. I remember sitting at the computer, and this was when she was much younger and such skinnier. I would put her on the chair behind me and she would kind of sit behind me and I'd be browsing the internet for cars or whatever I was doing. And I would kind of talk to her and be like 'oh what do you think of that?'* and she would just look at me and not care. But

*I did talk to her.*

Jay remembered having play talk with the dog Max when he was a younger child:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I talked to Max, but kind of like a normal little kid talks to a dog. Not really for emotional support, but just like ‘oh we’re going to do this and we’re going to do that’. Kind of like a kid talks to their imaginary friend.*

Natalie also reported having had these types of conversations with her animals:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *It’s not like me venting. It’s like that pet talk that you do, when you’re like ‘oh you’re so pretty, look at you.’ It’s not like having an actual conversation. It’s like baby pet talk. It sounds different.*

At times, David had also spoken to his cats in this manner:

David (24 year old transmute): *Sometimes... “Hey watch doin’? You speaking?’ Or ‘are you hungry?’ Or ‘what do you think today’s gonna be?’ Something along the lines of that. ‘You need to be brushed.’ and cute things like that.*

Molly mentioned having play talk with her snakes:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *Yeah I talk to them. I like the snakes the most. Just cause they’re weird. And no one really has them. I don’t really talk to them like a therapist. More just kind of telling them how cool they are. Like ‘oh you’re so beautiful. Oh you ate so well today’. Just kind of like complimenting them on things that snakes do.*

Sara Katherine shared that she also used to read to her animals as a small child:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *I vaguely remember that I — I remember like reading to her when I was learning how to read in kindergarten or*



*whatever.*

While none of the participants reported reading to animals as an adolescent or as a young adult, Cynthia shared another form of communication with the dogs at her work:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *...and I talk to a lot of the dogs in the day camp room at the hotel. Cause that's kind of the downfall of not working with people is like I'm kind of alone all day with the dogs. So I'll definitely, if they'll bark or sneeze, I'll be like 'God Bless You'. And ask them how they're doing. If they're having fun, if they like me. I definitely talk to them a lot. the day camp room I would talk to them. I would sing them songs and stuff. Because you would get really bored. You could be in there for like four hours straight.*

### **Talking to Animals for Emotion**

The final aspect of talking to companion animals involves speaking for emotional support. Speaking for the purpose of venting, confiding, or just to be heard by another living being proved to be common for many of the participants. This was true especially for those individuals who did not report a strong support system or were not comfortable disclosing the questions about their own growing sexual identity. Sara Katherine shared account of her emotive talking with her dog Zoey:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *Well I remember talking to her if I was mad at my mom or my brother or a friend. Or if I was upset about something. Cause Zoey slept on my bed every night. On my feet pretty much. And so yeah like I said before I wasn't — I was never really super emotionally close with my family. And at the time I really only had a few friends in the*

*neighborhood and in high school my friends were all social outcasts and I didn't really feel super connected to them. I just hung out with them. So I talked to Zoey a lot about frustration and life and whatever...I know I would just kind of vent to her or tell her how much I loved her.*

Molly told of how she would talk to her dogs for support:

*Molly (21 year old bisexual female): I kind of explained to them my situation. Kind of trying to figure out why my parents are fighting or tell them — I made sure I came out to Molly (dog) too. Just oh by the way this is happening too, this is school, this is my life, how sports are going. Just kind of kind of what you would do at the end of the day; sit down and say everything that happened.*

Cynthia answered affirmatively that she spoke with her dog for emotional support and comfort:

*Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): Probably yeah. Probably Dakota. Probably like just that I loved him.. I would ask him if he loved me back. And I would make him give me hugs and stuff. He was like a very rambunctious puppy. And he got very bad separation anxiety. So I think I would literally crawl into his kennel.*

Keri gave her an account of speaking to her dog as a means to begin processing disturbing issues and in preparation to speak with other people:

*Keri (25 year old lesbian): I think it helped me to open up to more people sometimes. Even if I never — throughout that whole time, not having a consistent person that I could — vent to — sometimes I would say something*

*or be talking about something or crying like whatever to my dog and I would be like I need to actually talk about this with someone who can actually give me a little bit back, verbally. And so then that's like when I would be like okay I realized that's actually something I need to process. And then would bring it to someone. Often I jumped around different people. Which is why I think like I said I didn't have one person because as much as I didn't have necessarily a set support system, I did always feel like I had support in some way. I found a way to find support basically.*

Natalie often confided in her animals and regarding her sexual orientation, she came out to her dog Rex as a test before coming out to other humans:

*Natalie (20 year old lesbian): Yeah I would. I told my dog I was gay. I came out to my dog. I was like "Rex, I'm gay". He was — he obviously didn't respond, but I was like okay, cool, I did it.*

Mathew described his most common speech to his dog:

*Mathew (24 year old gay male): I think just the normal things. Asked her about her day. Told her about mine. Yeah normal things you say to a dog.*

He reported less frequent moments in which he would confide in his dog Shira:

*Mathew (24 year old gay male): I think, but on very rare occasions. Like it might be a comment in passing dealing with something, somehow remotely connected with my sexuality that I would take for granted that she knew what my sexuality was. But I wouldn't be like (whispers) 'Just so you know' like coming out to the dog.*

Several participants were not sure of their speaking for emotional support with their dogs however. James recalled play talk and giving directions but was not certain if his conversations were on an emotional level:

James (26 year old gay male): *I don't know... I'm trying to remember. I wasn't necessarily having long philosophical conversations with them. None of us has the attention spans for that. I'm not sure. Sorry I don't really have a good answer for that one. I'm not really sure.*

He was also unsure if he discussed his sexuality with his dog Venus:

James (24 year old gay male): *Or at least kind of talked about it aloud or mumbled about it aloud while she was in the room. Or I was alone in the house with her maybe.*

Jay gave conflicting reports of speaking to his dogs though he expressed an emotional bond especially with his dog Cherry. He stated that in the past:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I wouldn't really talk to my dogs.*

And later he shared that presently:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *But I don't actually talk to them, no.*

Later in the interview when he spoke about missing his family dogs, he shared a different account:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *Like I haven't talked to Sparky and Cherry for a very long time, maybe like a month and a half, but to me that's like forever.*

For those participants who shared that they did speak with their animals on an emotional level, I asked them if they spoke to their animals at the present time. Sara Katherine gave a candid answer:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *I do. My roommates think I'm crazy!*

James then did recall speaking with his two present family dogs on an emotional level:

James (26 year old gay male): *Mmmm. Yeah. Especially when I'm there just the two of us, me and them. I'll talk to them and you know tell them things, not that they're going to listen to me. Or ask them to sit or leave me alone or not lick me or something like that, and they don't do it. They just do what they want anyway. But yeah I was having a bit of a hard time with some things while I was there, and I did talk to them a bit. It also helped to just kind of sit there and pick up Jeffrey and plop him on my lap. Not that the other one was happy about it, but she doesn't fit.*

Molly reported that while she did speak with her dogs on an emotional level at the present, the process was more helpful for her during her sexual development:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *I guess when I was younger with Bailey, it was much better. With Molly (dog), I feel upset because it's kind of like I know she can't really understand me and I know she doesn't understand what's going on and she can't really do anything about it. So it feels nice to say it, but she can't really do anything. So I guess that kind of bums me out. But I'll still do it. It doesn't matter to me.*

David provided a summation of why he still speaks to his cats for emotional support:

David (24 year old transmale): *I think cause I talk to my animals the majority of the time, like randomly walking down the hallway or something — I think it gives me an opportunity to talk to other people easier, so pretty much so.*

### **Chapter: 8 External Society**

Despite individual neighborhoods, communities, or regions, we live in a heterosexist or heteronormative society. Expectations that straight cisgender identities are omnipresent persist in media, schools, and in many families. All of the participants spent at least some of their upbringing in the Middle Atlantic region of the United States. Keri lived in Washington State for part of her childhood and sexual development, but her family relocated to the East coast later on. Eighty percent of the participants either lived in or currently reside in a suburban area. One person, Alex, grew up in a rural environment in Southwestern Pennsylvania while Molly was the sole person who was raised in an urban setting. As this study is not meant to be generalized beyond the ten interviews, the suburban background of eighty percent of the participants must be noted as a commonality specific to this study. Nevertheless, external influences and views on LGBT+ issues influenced each participant's life and were discussed in the interviews.

Companion animals served as a coping mechanism for the participants as they sought ways to counter external forces. This chapter addresses the external forces of Heterosexism, Homophobia, Family Homophobia, Transphobia, Animals as a Buffer against External Forces, Religion, High School Experiences, Early Adulthood, Human Support, LGBT+ Influences, Current Support System, Fears, Threats, and Bullying.

## **Heterosexism**

In Chapter One of this dissertation, heterosexism was defined for those of us who live in the United States. It impacts every facet of society on a daily basis as people are assumed to be heterosexual and thusly living straight lives. Young LGBT+ people who are questioning their own emerging sexual orientations or gender identities are faced with this societal pressure to be straight. Sara Katherine explained how this pressure affected her as a bisexual youth:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *It bothers me a lot....I was always kind of like, I guess because of heterosexism, I always assumed that I was straight, and that everyone was straight....And it was just like really hard to try to fit into that heterosexism sort of world...other people's expectations. And I think that's something I struggled with a lot. Struggled with and kind of still struggle with my parents, because I'm trying to like meet their expectations.*

Jay told about an experience he had with a heterosexist coworker regarding same sex marriage. Jay was in high school at the time and not out to the public:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I think sophomore or junior year of high school, I put up a status on Facebook after having an argument with one of my co-workers. I used to work at a dog kennel-so if you couldn't tell I really like dogs. And one of*

*my coworkers was talking about how um... OH! I guess this is significant... there were two coworkers there. One of them was saying that gay people should not be allowed to get married because they can't have children. And I looked at him, I think it was the guy. And I said you literally make zero sense. Just because you can't have children doesn't mean you can't get married. That's when the girl chimes in and she's like okay well I'm infertile, are you saying I can't get married? And he's like uh uh no, and she's like but I can't have children. And he's like well you could adopt. And I was like well so could gay people. And now we actually have technology where gay people can actually have their own biological children.*

He also shared a comical view about how he saw that one of his preferences differed from heterosexual norms:

*Jay (23 year old gay male): Like if you go into my room back home, it's like plastered with pictures of Katy Perry, which I can't think of a single straight man that would have pictures of Katy Perry plastered all over their walls.*

Molly discussed her views on homosexuality based on her community views as she only began to acknowledge her own bisexual identity:

*Molly (21 year old bisexual female): Just knowing in that super republican area, being gay is derogatory. So it was easy to insult someone by saying they were gay.... No. I was just kind of like yup, this is how it is, man and woman. Just kind of like kept seeing that and was told that. And didn't question it, until kind of like sophomore year of high school*

Keri expressed how much heterosexism has affected her life as a sexual minority youth:



Keri (25 year old lesbian): *So much. That's like every day of my life. Yeah I think it happened like... I didn't really know much about in general about like heterosexism until I went to college. And realized like oh crap our society is wow. And like took women's and gender study courses and started to really like dive into being a feminist.... I think I felt like I needed... like I was supposed to be dating men. And so I had to do stuff with men.*

The expectation to be heterosexual can lead to assumptions made by others. Cynthia shared how her family would ask about her straight relationships:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *I definitely remember there being so many times...like my pop-pop would come over and visit and he would be like so do you have boyfriend yet. And I would always be like nope, I don't have a boyfriend. Yeah I think my parents definitely assume I'm going to marry a man, and have kids, and live in the suburbs.*

Mathew described the heterosexist aspects of his hometown where he was both raised and still currently resided:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *It's still very white Christian, hetero-normative, what you would expect from a small American town. It's not like walking around I would see gay couples.*

In an interesting point, Alex drew a correlation between the heterosexist pressures he faced as a youth along with his desire to work with animals:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *I knew I wanted to be a vet since I was five years old. I don't know what came first, if I knew I wanted to be a vet or if I knew I was gay. They both happened around the same time. I don't know what either entailed.*

*I grew into both. I had learned that I had to like science, and I learned that I had to brace myself for judgment being passed by other people who don't approve of a lifestyle because of their personal religion. So it's strange but in a way they kind of went hand in hand.*

## **Homophobia**

I asked participants about their experiences with homophobia during their sexual development. Most interviews included responses about the fear of homophobic backlash as a reason to be discreet and conscious of their sexual orientation and behavior. Moving beyond heterosexism, homophobia is the actual verbal or physical threat of retribution for being LGBT+. Sara Katharine shared her self moderation of sexual expression because of the fear of homophobic retaliation:

*Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): You have to come out and there's people who are going to discriminate you. And I've never experienced any discrimination directly. And I don't think either has my brother. We're both really fortunate in that way. But I know it exists. And I know that I have to be careful.*

Jay spoke about the presumed homophobia from some of his classmates as a teenager, although he never experienced any himself:

*Jay (23 year old gay male): From the Christians at school. But that's about it. It was just kind of like things on the news. It was never anything specific. But it was like in school we were talking about the Westboro Baptist church, and people like them. And no one that I know at school used religion as an anti-gay shield. But I'm assuming there had to have been someone at my school. We had 590 kids.*

*Odds are one of them was a homophobe. But I never interacted with them. I don't know about them.*

With a similar experience, James told that he knew of homophobes but never experienced any sort of homophobic attack on a personal level:

*James (26 year old gay male): I guess in some ways but I wasn't necessarily very privy to it. I caught a little flack because I did theatre and I saw some of it that way. But it wasn't. I don't feel like it was overly hostile or anything like that.*

### **Family Homophobia**

Homophobic comments from within one's own family can be especially hard to hear. Numerous participants told me about their experiences with family homophobia. Natalie shared how her family placed pressure on her to conform to being a heterosexual:

*Natalie (20 year old lesbian): So I sort of grew up thinking that is what I needed and literally it would be to the point of my mom and my Grand mom saying, I pray for you to find a Godly husband. It was sort of assumed at birth, that I was gonna be straight. Which didn't happen? Ha-ha!*

She continued to speak about her parents and twin sister's negative reaction to her homosexuality and how her mother has forbade her from telling her grandmother:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *Because she thinks it will kill her. She's like, she will literally have a heart attack and die. I'm like I'm pretty sure it not how that works but okay.*

Her parents simply did not accept that she was a lesbian and had Natalie attend gay conversion therapy (which has since been deemed illegal in New Jersey):

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *They sent me to conversion therapy so I basically went back in to the closet. That didn't go over well either but it went better in the sense that I stuck up for myself and I was like "No, I'm not going to therapy again!" It was bad in the sense that my Dad disowned me and we didn't talk for a month. Now he hasn't disowned me anymore. Basically, I'm out but my parents are choosing not to see it, if that makes sense. But like literally everywhere else.*

Natalie continued to talk about how her father continues to battle in accepting that his daughter is not heterosexual:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *The last time I raised the issue was with my Dad. He wanted to come to campus and have bible study with me essentially. We had one. And then after I had said something on Facebook about being gay, he texted me and asked if he was wasting his time in coming to have these sessions with me. I was like; if you are coming down to make me straight, then Yea. We had a huge argument. That was the last time we discussed that.*

Cynthia reported on the homophobic comments that she heard from her parents as she grew up:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *Both of my parents saying some pretty homophobic things growing up..... Yeah like if we were out in public and see a gay couple, they would usually comment on it. Or my mom would call women dykes a lot that she didn't like. And it was usually it was not like that evil type of ate. It was kind of more they were trying to be funny, you know.*

She continued on to say how her father's homophobic reactions to other family have stopped her from coming out as pansexual to him:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *It may even be just like an unspoken thing that everybody knows or I don't know. But I just don't want to have... part of why I didn't come out is because my cousin Betty is also Pan, and my dad is on Facebook now, which is ridiculous, and he saw her post a status about being pansexual, and the next time I came home my mom and dad were like did you hear about Bobbi and her weird- they made up a word that's not even close. And they were like cracking up and I was like so what. And they were like I don't know it's just a funny word. And I was like cool. So that's like part of it. Because they think it's probably not even real.*

Cynthia wondered if perhaps her parents would react differently to her, but still remained hesitant:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *I don't know if they would have the same reaction about me and Bobbi. Because Bobbi's not their kid. But they would*

*probably just think something weird. I feel like they are getting more okay with certain things, but I don't know. They'll take like a couple steps forward and one back, you know what I mean, with like the comments that they say. But I probably will eventually come out to them. Maybe in my thirties.*

Mathew recalled a homophobic comment from his father that he heard during his adolescence at home. He interpreted it as a tasteless joke:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *I remember he made a comment when I got my ears pierced. He made a gay comment. The way I remember it is "that's what fags do." But when I say it, it makes it sound very hateful. And it sounds weird saying like it wasn't that hateful because of the language, but it wasn't. It was meant to be a joke. I think just cause of how he grew up, he doesn't know gay individuals. Same thing with the spitting out the food, I don't think it was out of open hate.*

Jay also told of a homophobic comment from his mother that has tempered his willingness to come out to her:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *She just kind of gets really uncomfortable. So for example this is the only defining moment I can think of. We were at my cousin's house and she was channel surfing, back when cable didn't exist, so she could just use little arrows on optimums remote. But she was channel surfing and I guess it was pride that day that that we were there. So I think New York was caught on one of the news casts, news channels was covering it. So she stops on it and is just like "ew/yuk" and changes the channel immediately. And I even asked her, like*

*mom why that sound? Like why sound disgusting. And she's like I don't want to watch gay people. And I was like alright cool. I'm going to drop that subject now. I want to say sophomore year of high school, I think. So this was after I knew I was gay, which was why I asked why the disgusted tone. But before I was out because I was also like mom you're not going to know, I'm not telling you.*

## **Transphobia**

This dissertation also reported on transphobia or the fear of transgender people in Chapter One, but the topic became much more personal in several interviews. As gay and lesbian rights have continued to advance in the United States, equivalent transgender rights have often been ignored. At the same time while homophobia is certainly still prevalent in social situations as indicated by the prior section, in some arenas it has become less apparent. Transphobia however is common and often times not hidden from public discussion. In 2016, North Carolina among several states, legislated discriminatory policies on bathroom usage directed at transgender individuals. President Trump in 2017 issued his call for a ban on transgender people from serving in any branch of the military.

Keri described the transphobic atmosphere as even greater than the homophobia in school during her adolescence:

*Keri (25 year old lesbian): Very negative. The individual who identified as trans in high school, she was f to m. but she wasn't using male pronouns at that time. Now he is using male pronouns. But didn't feel comfortable in high school. But he dressed like a boy in high school. Just even that was there was so many negative reactions to that. And he got beat up a lot.*

She continued to speak about the time she dated a transmale and the negative reaction from her mother. She described her mother's reaction as even more hostile than towards the idea of Keri dating another woman:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *Well she had more push back when I started dating the trans guy actually than when I was dating a woman. Like before him. So I don't know she...I think there was a little bit of negative reactions from her in the sense... It was less from her, more from my step family, for sure.*

As the only transgender participant, David told of his personal experiences with transphobia. David was born female and came out as a lesbian prior to coming to terms that he identified as a male. He described being cautious on disclosing his gender identity:

David (24 year old transmale): *Yeah. Back then, I probably wouldn't have said anything to anybody in fear of me ruining my reputation. Now I try to talk to other people and educate other people about it. Because I'm more open, but I'm not like open.*

He continued to speak about the majority of his family who were not accepting of first his sexual orientation and secondly of his gender identity:

David (24 year old transmale): *The last time we've probably talked, I was probably ten. I was probably ten when I talked to them. Other than that they don't associate with us. Even my mom's brother doesn't really talk to her at all. They're kind of the richy people that were very conservative. My one cousin actually sent my mom a card one time saying that I was getting into stuff that I shouldn't get into, referring to me being gay and stuff... yeah one of those Jesus cards that are*



*very religious, probably would get for their birthday or something. It was like 'hey how are you doing? I'm very concerned about... at the time it was a different name, a female name... so yeah there was a lot of discriminatory from family.*

David's mother was the only family member who was supportive of him regardless of his orientation or gender identity. He came out to her and she helped him look at biological options including hormone therapy:

David (24 year old transmale): *So it wasn't surprising when I came out trans. It was just kind of like okay well whenever you want to get on hormones we'll do it. And I finally got enough money to do it. So it was pretty easy. I was like I'm pretty sure I'm supposed to be trans, and then I looked into it. And a couple years later, like I got on hormones at 23, and now I'm a lot happier.*

Regarding transphobia from the public, David shared his need to be discreet for his own safety:

David (24 year old transmale): *There's always that feeling though, like walking out the street and getting beaten or the worst of the worst. But I haven't gotten public discriminatory stuff yet. But probably because I pass most of the time as just a male. So I don't think that that will ever happen, but you can never be too sure. Because if someone opens their mouth, then you never know.*

David shared the following about transphobic reactions that he is finding as he is trying online dating:

David (24 year old transmale): *It's mainly like dating websites and stuff... like I have a lot of gay apps, because right now I'm looking for dudes. So like they can be discriminatory. They'll be like oh well you don't have a penis. And just like well why does that matter, I'm still a male. You know what I mean. Like they'll be some stupid stuff like that. Just like, they're like uneducated. It's really weird. Like I was probably had less trouble dating as a bi female or a lesbian female at the time than I am now. It's like the first part of the LGBT community is like we love you, and then it's like okay you're at the bottom of the T, and then you go to date the B and the G, and it's like no we don't want you. And I'm just like oh okay. But a lot of straight men do. Which is really weird.*

### **Animals as a Buffer against External Forces**

Participants shared their experiences of using their companion animals as buffers against heterosexism, homophobia, or transphobia. Every participant found comfort from their animals when humans were less than supportive. Alex found solace from his animals that he could not from his human cohorts:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *I had friends as a child, and many sleepovers and stuff. But I spent time with my pets everyday and I could take or leave human children friends for my animals. Cause I don't know. They were always there, and there was so much to do to take care of them and then just enjoy their company.*

Sara Katherine recalled the comfort she felt from her dog in both times of need and in times of joy:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *I feel like I'm focusing a lot on like negative conversations because she was the one that I turned so I remember being really sad while I was talking to her. But she when she would like, like give me kisses or put her paw on me or I don't know, I would feel better.*

Regarding the emotional comfort that he found with his dog Venus, James spoke about this bond:

James (26 year old gay male): *Yeah, it was a sense of comfort I suppose. Knowing that even if I had a really crappy day, I could go home and she would be there. Just knowing that she was there, I could at least get one pet in before she kind of scooted away. I could just go down and scratch her behind — say hi. Not that she would go pounding down the stairs to greet me. But she would kind of come and wag her tail and do the dog thing.*

He spoke further about the emotional comfort that he still seeks from his family's current dogs:

James (26 year old gay male): *Yeah absolutely. I've been having a hard time with some things lately and just, and when I can get the one who snuggles, Jeffrey, alone, I will bring him over and just kind of give him a hug and pet him for a moment.*

James offered more clarity to this comfort from dogs:

James (26 year old gay male): *I guess you feel sad or upset or something of that nature. And the dog reads it, and I'll go in for a hug or something, or just kind of stoop down and start petting them. And they just stand there and let you do it. Is just kind of like 'I'm here I'm here for you'. Not that they can do a whole heck of*

*a lot. But them just being there makes a difference. And it's just nice to know that you have that. It's not a person, but you have that person too.*

Jay shared the emotional comfort that he finds from his dog Cherry:

*Jay (23 year old gay male): Cherry's the one that if I were to have a bad day. She would be the one to come up to me and ask to pet her and lick me. So that kind of emotional support that would provide.*

He continued to tell about his closeness with Cherry as well as his family's other dog

Sparky:

*Jay (23 year old gay male): I don't know. I guess we were just really close. I don't know if that's weird to say that I'm really close to the dog. But like I don't talk to some of my friends for a while and like I don't really care. But I don't talk —er I don't Facetime with my parents. And they'll like put Sparky and Cherry on the camera. But I'll be like anxious. Like I haven't talked to Sparky and Cherry for a very long time, maybe like a month and a half, but to me that's forever. And it's like I'm missing them more and more every day. And there's so many more pictures on my phone of them. Because I went through all my Facebook when I first got my dogs and downloaded all of those pictures onto my iPhone so I could just look at those.*

Jay then spoke about how Cherry's happiness also affects his own:

*Jay (23 year old gay male): But it's also funny because I know Cherry's mood influences my mood, which influences my parents' mood.*

While Jay elaborated on his bond especially with Cherry, other participants conveyed the emotional comfort that they found from their own companion animals as well. Molly shared about her sense of well-being that she derived from her dog when she returns home:

Molly (21 year bisexual female): *It's like nice when I come home and she's super excited to see me, like loves me. Knows that I'll feed her and take her for walks, and give her all this attention.*

Molly also spoke about finding emotional comfort from different species besides dogs. After giving her cat away to a friend in college, she told a time that she 'borrowed' the cat back to help her mood:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *And there was an instance last year where I was in a very bad mood and the cat was actually at a friend's house because my roommates were like 'we don't want him.' And my girlfriend's roommate was like 'oh I'm allergic', which meant she really just doesn't like cats, but has a sniffle and is just like I don't want him So I took the cat from the friend's house, and was like I want him back, he's mine. I just took him home and I apologized later because it was really rude of me to just like barge in and take him, but I took him because I wanted him and I was feeling bad, and it helped to have him there with me.*

In her interview, Keri spoke about the emotional comfort that she finds from her dog Mr. Seward:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *He helps me in general. I mean kind of with that closeness and petting And he, I don't know, I feel like he's in tune with my emotions sometimes because there are times when I get in my head or get really*

*upset when I am like crying and stuff. He even if had been chewing on his favorite bone, like he'll come over and he's like licking up on my face. He loves to lick in general. And his licks help a lot in general. They normally come at the right time. Sometimes they're a little overwhelming because sometimes he does it when it's not the right time. But overall, even then I'm still like you're such a goof like get off. It'll make me laugh like in times when I'm not expecting to laugh and it helps a lot.*

Also finding emotional comfort from her dog, Natalie told of how her dog helps to lift her spirits at times:

*Natalie (20 year old lesbian): He is very well attuned to my emotions. So he knows what I need when I need it. So like it was nice to have something living to hold onto if that make sense. And he is also just a sweet little person who would pick my feet or lick my face if I was in a particularly bad mood.*

Cynthia shared her experience with her dog as an emotional comfort:

*Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): Like I would make him come into my room and hang out with me if I was having a bad day, because he was usually downstairs. But I would call him up with treats, then I would shut the door and then he'd try to leave, and I'd be like 'no, you're not going anywhere' .... But yeah I definitely seek comfort from him a lot, and cuddle with him, lie on the carpet with him, get covered in dog hair.*

Mathew shared this sentiment as he found emotional comfort with his dog Shira even if she did not directly reflect that comfort back:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *I remember being very comfortable around her, which is probably why I went to her in situations like if I was crying. Like I said, she's moody, so she won't be the type of dog that would like pick up on if someone's upset, and come comfort you. She would just kind of like lay there and look annoyed that I was there. But I felt very comfortable around her.*

Emotional comfort and security could be found for David from his cats:

David (24 year old transmale): *Sometimes if I can't talk to somebody, I'll grab my cat and just hug him for hours on end. And eventually I just feel better... Yeah, I've been holding and petting a lot of my animals lately, because I'm always nervous anymore in this era. So if my mom's not home anymore, I go straight to my cats. If my friend's not home, I go straight to my cats. I go to my cats and my video games. That the only thing that works for me.*

## **Religion**

Religion plays an important part of many people's lives despite living in a secular society. Regardless of the argument that public policy should clearly not be subjected to the faith of some, religion impacts almost every aspect of communal life. Many religious denominations publically condemn homosexuality or nontraditional gender identity. Religion directly influenced all ten participants' experiences in their own households and impacted how they viewed themselves as LGBT+ youth. Companion animals themselves did not impact a participant's

family religion but rather served as buffers against social marginalization that was linked to one's religion.

Growing up in a religious home and perhaps attending a faith-based school, many participants reported hearing mixed messages about sexual and gender minorities. Alex told of his initial religious background:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *I attended Catholic school, until fourth or fifth grade. I went to public school in fifth grade. I was made to go to church by my dad. I had a big imagination. I never really believed in the Christian or Catholic church. Because I had such a big imagination, I thought there was more of a fantasy afterlife and not just following some rules, strict stringent rules in getting to a better after life. I also realized at a very young age that it was quote a sin to be gay. So that made me lose my interest quick.*

He also spoke about his divorced father and extended paternal family's religious biases towards LGBT+ people:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *I didn't want my dad or anyone on his side of the family to know. They're all religious fanatics, and they're all judgmental.*

James shared an example of his Catholic upbringing conflicting with views on homosexuality and marriage that ultimately led him to leave the church:

James (26 year old gay male): *Prior to high school I was. I was raised Catholic and I did like the altar serving thing and did CCD and all that.. but after actually I was having a confirmation interview with the priest at the church, and my*



*parents were there with me. And he said something... he was talking about marriage, and he said something about two men and two women being able to get married. And I said yeah that's fine because I didn't care, it didn't bother me. And he went off and flipped out, of course made me cry. My mother was furious. He was not... he was really not a nice person to begin with. That was kind of the end of it for me. I just didn't go back after that.*

He went on to tell about how his parents respected his decision and did not try to force religion on him again:

*James (26 year old gay male): Yeah well they really just kind of...because they were both raised Catholic they wanted me to have the option if I ever wanted it. I did it. And they had kind of fallen out of it too. They just stuck with it for my sake, and when I said I really didn't want to go back, they said okay that's fine, and they didn't either.*

Mathew grew up in a religious household with born again Evangelical parents. He attended a faith-based school until he went to college:

*Mathew (24 year old gay male): I was raised in an Evangelical Christian home. But also I went to an Evangelical Christian elementary school, middle school, and high school.... It's like the Evangelical thing, hate the sin not the sinner.... It was a lot of.. a lot of dialogue was talking about the gay lifestyle, which there is a lot of dialogue about that. Gays are overly promiscuous. A lot of that, overly sexual, which was looked down a lot. And then they fell into a dialogue about trying to be open minded about the subject. So just like grouping gays in with other sinners.*

*Unlike Westboro Baptists, which targets certain LGBT communities, the church wasn't really targeting them, so much as just grouping them with drug addicts and adulterers, these other forms of sin, especially sexual sin. So then that falls into the category of heaven and hell, stuff like that.*

He described how his Evangelical high school did not permit any overtly sexual behavior regardless of orientation:

*Mathew (24 year old gay male): You do sign a waiver going in. they do have rights to kick people out for various reasons. So like before.. I only went to that school for 2 ½ years, because I had switched from one Christian high school to another Christian high school. But before I went, there were students that had gotten kicked out because it was revealed that they were having a sexual relationship, a heterosexual couple.*

Natalie shared about going to a Pentecostal elementary and middle school before a Catholic high school:

*Natalie (20 year old lesbian): If you could think of a stereotypical protestant school, that was it. I mean I wore uniforms. I had bible class every day. I had chapel every week. Like all of our stuff revolved around Christianity. They didn't believe in evolution, etc. high school as a little different, because I went to catholic high school. It was still the same in that the teaching itself was pretty conservative, but it was definitely more liberal. It was more liberal in comparison because there were out teachers there which was nice. But it was still pretty*

*conservative in that the priest was very homophobic and would occasionally say anti-gay things.*

Not out to her parents, Cynthia described her religious upbringing:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *I was raised religiously....Yeah my parents weren't like strictly religious. They swore and they would I guess sin in their eyes. But we went to church every Sunday. I went to youth group every Monday night. Bible study, Jesus camps, like the whole nine yards. And like a Christian high school.*

Cynthia then described how she kept a diary in which she recorded her inner battle with accepting her sexual orientation while attending church:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *I actually kept diaries throughout the whole thing, my whole life basically. And I'll read through them sometimes just to see what I was talking about. Most of it's ridiculous, but like this one thing I said to myself is I feel like I'm putting on a mask when I'm at church. And then when I'm with my friends I'm my true self. And when I'm with my parents I'm like almost my true self, but like not exactly. And I feel like it was definitely like, I felt like I was being differently people pretending to be somebody I wasn't, especially at church, because you want to seem holy.*

Molly spoke about her parent's two separate religions and on her own faith:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *And I was like my dad is a Jehovah's witness, so he's been very anti-gay since as far as I can remember. And then my*

*mom was raised Catholic but she's not practicing.... My dad tried to take us really really young. But it never worked out. No one really wanted to go. I identify as atheist. My brother is agnostic. I think my sister is probably agnostic. We aren't a religious family. And even my grandparents who are Catholic, they don't even go to church I don't think. And then my other grandparents, the Jehovah's Witnesses, they're both deceased.*

Much to her surprise, Molly's father reacted to her bisexuality extraordinarily well. Despite her initial worries about his anti-gay rhetoric and his religious followings, her father embraced her openness:

*Molly (21 year old bisexual female): And my dad starts laughing. And then we went to the grocery store together and he's like you're twenty years old, or however old, nineteen years old, I've raised you how I have. If that's your choice, that's your choice I really don't care. Your mom and I just don't really like each other, so it makes sense that she's trying to get you to be mad at me.... It was very shocking. I was planning on not telling him for much longer than that whole process. But I was just very shocked at her (mother) response versus his.*

In an earlier excerpt, David spoke about how his extended family uses religion against him as a transmale. David told of his own Methodist upbringing and eventual move away from the church:

*David (24 year old transmale): We grew up as Methodist. But as I got older, I finally got to the point, like okay I need to pick my own side, you know what I mean. I don't personally really believe in God or anything like that. I'm pretty*

*much all over. I think more of like, there's probably more than one God, or what the supposed God is. So I'm kind of just more spiritual than anything. Mom was pretty much the same way too.*

Regarding a religious upbringing that did not conflict with her sexual orientation, Sara Katherine shared about her Jewish background:

*Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): My family's Jewish. We went to synagogue. I went to Hebrew school. We went to synagogue on like the holy days. I kind of quit. I was Bat Mitzvahed. I quit in high school sometime. I just didn't really feel super connected to the religion.*

She continued to describe her family and how she did not see any direct homophobia from her religious upbringing:

*Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): As far as I know in Judaism, I don't really know how they view homosexuality in it. I was never really super involved. I just kind of went. So I don't know. But I could see how it was, if it was a different religion it would be more of an issue. I'm not sure about that. I know growing up, my cousin who I mentioned is like ten years older than me, is a lesbian, and now she's married and has a daughter. Whenever we would have Passover at their house, they would always put like a fruit, like an orange on the Seder plate, to recognize the struggles of LGBT Jews. It was really nice, and I never really thought much of it. I was like oh this is normal. And then the other side of my family...that was my dad's side of the family....my mom's side was like that's weird they put an orange on the Seder plate. I was just like no, I think that's nice.*

*So I think that as far as the religion goes, as much as I'm aware, I never really felt any discrimination from that. I just didn't, I kind of came out as an atheist also. I don't know. I just didn't feel super connected to the religion for multiple reasons.*

Overall the participants shared about their personal journeys with religion as a potential obstacle in their sexual development. Several had chosen to leave their religion of family origin in order to escape a form of homophobic judgement. A common theme was trying to reconcile being LGBT+ and coming out to religious family members. The use of companion animals as a buffer to external judgement was present though not in direct correlation to any specific aspect of faith.

### **High School Experiences**

Some discussion of high school experiences arose in the prior conversations regarding heterosexism and homophobia, but my interview questions dealt further with the topic of a description of each participant's time in high school. Some responses were short basic descriptions of their school. No participant described any type of animal assisted therapy within their high school, and the role of their own companion animals pervaded in their respective home situations. As each participant's time in high school coincided with their sexual development, the influence of companion animals was not further elaborated upon in this section but rather gave additional insight into the external pressures faced by each participant. Alex commented on his public high school in a rural community:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *My high school was tiny. My town's population was like 300 people.*

Molly offered a much more detailed description of her larger high school and the students whom attended:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *There were about 500 people in my class. It was 98% white. I'll say like 98% upper middle class. And then it was like a blue ribbon school. So everyone was really really smart, even the people who were like stoners and just doing another were still taking like 5 AP classes. It was very like everyone knew everyone, because we had been together for 7 years by the end. Like I think I went through my yearbook and didn't know two people by the end of my senior year. But it was like everyone had their clicks. And I think for the most part, the people that were good friends in middle school, stayed in that pocket throughout high school. So it was like social circles of about like 20...of the popular, which meant the lacrosse boys and the lacrosse girls, the track boys, the track girls. It was kind of like sports plus neighborhoods plus long-time friends.*

I then asked Molly if there were open LGBT+ students in her high school:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *There were always the people that we stereotypically knew as gay, the guys we knew that were gay. There was one trans man/ boy between middle school and high school, but I think he dropped out. There were the stereotypical ones that you knew that were the guys in theatre. I don't think there were any out lesbians or bi women in my school.*

Molly followed up by telling about how she perceived a low level of hostility from others to these students. She did not remember any overt taunting or bullying:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *Not much that I can recall. I think because they were secure in their bubble, like their bubble of the theater drama kids didn't attack them, so they were like safe in their bubble. I feel like most people stayed within their groups, and they weren't really bullied for it because they had no reason to talk to the people that would be bullying them and they were just fine there.*

Describing herself as a social outcast in high school, Sara Katherine told of her friendships with other marginalized youth:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *For middle school and early high school, I hung out a lot with kids who were in the special Ed program. I don't really know why. Maybe I just felt a little more comfortable around them. Like they were a little bit of an outcast. And I guess I was too. And then that was pretty much my social circle for a while. And I'm still friends with a lot of my friends have autism. Anyways, and then in late high school, I got more comfortable. I got really close with this one girl in my class. I hung out with her a lot. And her family was just like so accepting and awesome. And she was a heterosexual but her cousins and her...I don't even know...they were just very accepting people. And I hung out with them. And I started to feel more comfortable in my own shoes.*

Both Jay and Mathew shared their high school experiences as closeted gay boys:



Jay (23 year old gay male): *My friends. They didn't know I was gay. They all thought I was straight, which was kind of funny. But it was just my friends. I didn't really care to rely on my parents. Because going from middle school to high school, my parents were just constantly fighting. So I was like Fuck you, like I'm not going to talk to you guys. So I spent more with my friends. I spent more time out of the house. And I would say that's just it. Just my friends and some of their parents.*

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *Cause we couldn't come out when we were in high school, because it was a private school, so they could have kicked us out. But we wound up, relationships that I had in high school ended, friendships ended. Which I can't say for sure if that's a reason why or not. We could have just drifted apart, different lifestyles. But there were certain fiends that I was really close to that I don't really talk to anymore.*

Keri's high school experiences captured a consistent feeling of loneliness that lingered throughout numerous interviews:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *There were times during high school that I wasn't able to confide in anyone because I felt that the situations that were going on, like the people that I would normally confide in, I couldn't confide in. And that caused issues early on in high school.*

She summed up her experience with a statement that seemingly held true for many LGBT+ youth that held a secret:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *But in high school I always felt like I was walking on*

*egg shells.*

## **Early Adulthood**

Leaving high school culture and growing into an LGBT+ young adult were shared phenomena for the participants. Nine out of the ten participants attended college and lived either on a campus or at least in a different home than their families. For the individuals who did not physically move to a new residence, the shared phenomena of meeting a diverse group of new people including other LGBT+ youth bared discussion in their interviews. While living in an apartment or dormitory away from their family homes, this section also includes descriptions about missing one's companion animal. The subsections of Early Adulthood follow with a discussion of College is a Different World, School Demands, and Living Away from Home.

### **College is a Different World**

For the participants who attended college, this marked their first experience living in a different setting than with their family of origin. Some participants shared that they started to come out of the closet while in college. Jay remarked on the difference between attending college and his experience in high school:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I guess college happened. I went to Rutgers, and a lot of....I started thinking about it more. I started wondering oh when am I going to lose my virginity. I started thinking about sex more, then I lost my virginity. Then I came out.*

James also shared on his growing comfort level with his sexuality while he attended college:

James (26 year old gay male): *And especially being on a college campus at that time, it's very liberal. And people are more open about it there. so it just kind of became normalized.*

Though still living at home with her parents at the time, Cynthia attended a local community college and also explored her sexuality with which she was not comfortable doing so in high school:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *I don't think I like admitted to myself until after high school that I wasn't straight... I didn't really get too active until probably college years.*

Alex told of his improved outlook on his sexuality once he left his rural family home and attended college with other LGBT+ people:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *I'm not scared anymore. Growing up I see how it is now. I went to Morgantown for a year and attended school there. I finished my bachelor's elsewhere, but once I saw how many gay students there were in the college population, in West Virginia, I no longer believed that you had to move to one of two or three cities to live comfortably.*

Regarding her experience in a parochial high school, Natalie expressed that her current college experience has been extremely different and supportive for her continuing sexual development as a lesbian:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *I have a great support system in college. I am very lucky for that. I have a lot of close friends here who I know I can talk to. I'm a part of a larger alpha delta psi society, which is a literary society, and then we have chapters in other universities, and I've made a lot of close friends in other universities, as a result of this chapter. Ellen and Betty from the LGBT center, I know I can rely on them really well too. So my support system is a really tight knit group of friends that I have.*

### **School Demands**

Attending college in itself brings a host of stressors related to academics, finances, social situations, and living as an adult. Participants shared about how companion animals helped them cope with school demands. Alex was a first year student in a veterinary school. He mentioned the demands of the program itself and at times feeling isolated:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *I have a few friends in my program. I wouldn't say many friends or even acquaintances. They're all competitive or too into themselves. I feel very like a laid back person. Like this isn't my crowd.*

Alex then mentioned that has a serious boyfriend now on whom he relies for emotional support:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *I have my boyfriend. I'm moving in with him soon; he's the best. If I didn't have him, that school would have been a lot harder to*

*adjust to. Because he listened to me when I was stressing out about exams, or if I was going to pass a class through the semesters.*

As he had previously shared how his dog provided comfort to him in his youth, I asked Alex if he currently had a companion animal also while he was in veterinary school:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *I don't. I didn't budget for one and I wasn't sure if I would be able to handle one with my course demands as a first year student.*

Three participants mentioned officially recognized emotional support animals to help them cope with school or work stressors. Mr. Seward is Kerri's emotional support dog. She was working as a master's level therapist at the time of the interview and was applying for doctoral studies:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *I feel like I process things a lot with him. Especially recently when I was having to make decisions for my doctorate program. I'd be like so do you think that we can make it cause I'm going to be going to Texas. I made that decision two days ago officially. That that's the program I'm going to be going to. And with that I was like do you think we can make it in Texas. And I don't know like gauging his reaction. Even though he probably doesn't understand half of what I'm saying that's okay. But I talk through all of that with him. And I feel like especially recently he's been kind of my sounding board for when I'm not talking to my friends about it. I'm talking to Mr. Seward about it.*

Natalie expressed a sincere desire to obtain an emotional support animal for the following school year in college:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *Actually I'm applying for an emotional support animal, so hopefully I will....Yeah it's through the student disability services. So you have to see like a long term therapist, and fill out some forms, and then send it to the student disability services, and then it goes to a review board and then they approve you for adoption.... A lot of the reason that I want an emotional support animal is for the responsibility because especially this past few years, after coming out to my family, my mental health hasn't been too great. And I distinctly recall having... Well it wasn't great mental health... But I distinctly recall feeling better when I'm around animals and stuff. So I knew that having that responsibility and having a pet would be better for me.... Which is why I know an emotional support animal will help me.*

As Natalie had described most closely bonding with dogs, I asked her if she was applying for an emotional support dog:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *Uh, no. because my room is too small and I feel like that wouldn't be good for a dog to have. So like a hamster.... A lot of the reason that I want an emotional support animal is for the responsibility because especially this past few years, after coming out to my family, my mental health hasn't been too great. And I distinctly recall having... Well it wasn't great mental health... But I distinctly recall feeling better when I'm around animals and stuff. So I knew that having that responsibility and having a pet would be better for me.*

Jay mentioned his desire for his existing dog to be his support animal:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I told my friends I want to get Cherry one of those like, pretend I have anxiety. I know this is totally unethical because people actually do have anxiety. But just get her therapy dog approved, and bring her into class with me,, and have her sit there. Because she's not going to do anything. She'll just sit there happy. I mean she'll distract me, yes. If I can get my dogs into Philadelphia, that would be great. We have therapy dogs that come in once a semester and it's great.*

### **Living Away from Home**

Participants spoke about living away from their family home for school or work. A shared theme was that the participants missed their pets at home and discussed them much more so than missing their parents or other people. Alex told about his time away first as an undergraduate and then as a veterinary student:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *Yes. I've never not had a pet because.. I went away for one year of undergrad my freshman year. And then I moved home to complete the other three years at a nearby campus near my home. And I did a lot of commuting. So this is the first time I've really... I also went home more frequently when I went to West Virginia. But this is the first time that I've had prolonged separation from my pets at home and that's why I... My mom won't let me bring any of the pets here, or if she does it would be one of the old ones that's ready to die. But that's why I want a pet or pets. Once I settle down a bit more. I think it*

*was a good idea to allow myself time to adjust to the demands of graduate school curriculum and living in a new city. And living in a city for the first time.*

Molly shared her concerns over her dog Molly Smiles and how much she misses not being in the same home with her:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *I really don't go home that often, so I don't see her as much as I'd like to. But I guess it is just a ... I feel more responsible for her because Molly and I, we got along the most out of everyone. So I know that without me there, she's very unhappy, and my dad doesn't really have time to take her for walks. And my brother and sister are also busy. My brother's off in college. My sister's in high school. She doesn't want to spend her time taking care of the dog. My mom is always at work, so she doesn't want to take care of the dog. So she's my dog, but I never go home to see her.*

Jay lived away from his suburban family home in New Jersey while he was presently attending medical school in Philadelphia. He told of how he missed his dogs:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *And now that I'm in Philly I just sort of scroll through all of the pictures of them (on his I phone).*

Cynthia lived with her sister in an apartment not far from her parents' home. Though not being physically distant from her dogs, she wished that she could see them more:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *and I just run over to Dakota and be like I miss you so much. They are like definitely the main reason I visit home.... But I just miss them so much. And they're getting older so you gotta try to.... Molly was*



*just diagnosed with diabetes. And she's only like... she's not even ten years old yet. But it definitely makes me want to go home more and see them... They are like definitely the main reason I visit home. I feel like I visit more than I thought I would after moving out because I only moved out in July.*

At the time of the interview, James had recently moved in with his boyfriend about an hour away from his family home. He spoke about missing his dogs:

*James (26 year old gay male): Every time I'll run into a cute dog, or a see a cute cat or something, or rabbit running through the back yard, I get that little warm fuzzy feeling I suppose. I do enjoy going down and not just seeing my parents but seeing the dogs also... Yeah they still have two dogs that they had before I left.... The one is kind of really good. Jeffrey is just, he's just a.. I'm trying to think of how to describe him so simply. He's a snuggler. He's just very sweet, very lazy. He's a great dog. The other one's kind of a basket case, and she gets on my nerves a lot. I wouldn't have necessarily picked her. She's very sweet. She's not necessarily the dog for me. I was just there with them recently. They were away for a long weekend, so I stayed down there and took care of the two of them. We did pretty well I think, for my first time being there alone with both of them. I've done it with Venus and I've done it with Jeffrey before, but not with Jeffrey and the other one, Dixie. She's a basket case.*

When asked if he and his boyfriend had a dog of their own:

*James (26 year old gay male): Unfortunately I do not right now, as much as I would like to. I'm just not...we're not home enough.*

## Human Support

As social beings, we all interact with others and often look for means of support to decrease isolation and provide encouragement. Some participants reported finding this quality from their family or friends while others looked to non-human support. Eight participants shared having had difficulty with support from their own family. All eight of these individuals reported turning to their companion animals when human support was not available. I posed the open-ended question to each participant to describe their support systems during their sexual development and in turn received vastly different responses. Participants shared a description of their human support systems from both their adolescence and at the present. One person reported having had no human support during her adolescence and not finding other people to confide in until having reached college. Throughout this dissertation, animal support in lieu of or as addition to human support had been reported by the participants. This section focuses solely on humans as participants discussed their families, communities, and fellow LGBT+ people. James had overall positive comments about his supports though he was not out of the closet until young adulthood:

James (26 year old gay male): *I think I had a pretty good support system. I don't want to say I had a lot of friends, but I had at least a few who I knew I could count on if I needed something. I've always had a pretty good relationship with my parents. So if I needed them, I could talk them about most things. So I would I guess in a word, I would describe it as pretty good.*

I asked James if he included other family as part of his support system at that time. He was an only child but had cousins close to his age:

James (26 year old gay male): *I was always out of the house. I talked to friends more than I talked to my cousins. And the times I did talk to my cousins it was like I went to go see my grandparents because my grandparents lived with my cousins. I wouldn't really include them in my social, or support system then.*

James then shared his parents' reaction when he came out to them:

James (26 year old gay male): *It was fine. They were very supportive. They were surprised. They did not see that coming at all. We were on vacation and I just kind of... another friend of mine had texted me and said that he had just come out to his folks. And that was kind of the little push that I needed. And I just...okay if he can do it so can I. So I sat them down at dinner that night and just said I wanted to talk. And told. And they said okay.... I think I was more surprised that they were surprised. Kind of thought they had an inkling at least. But they never said anything. I guess they were just waiting. I thought they were just waiting for me to say it. But I guess they just... it wasn't even a thought in their head. They didn't even think about it.*

Mathew also reported a great deal of support from his parents, but not directly regarding his sexuality:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *Weirdly enough I had a conversation about this with my father like two days ago. They've always been very supportive of my actions and my decisions. When I was looking at colleges, for instance, I had this whole list, and they were very supportive of me choosing whatever college I wanted to go to, Christian or secular. Even when I was in college beyond that,*

*representative of their support, when I was switching majors around, and they were always very supportive of that. And again in middle school and high school when I decided I didn't want to play sports anymore, but wanted to do theatre, they would come to my shows. They were very supporting parents. It only gets confusing in that I felt that I couldn't rely on them for certain developmental support, which I guess carries into today. Even though they are super supportive in like 99% of everything, you know...Just not this one part that happened to be a huge part of my upbringing.*

A similarly conditional support from family was told by Sara Katherine:

*Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): And my mom, my grandparents, they would get...my dad was always there... but I guess in general all of them. They were kind of like why aren't you talking to us about it. We're your family. And they would get very offended that I wasn't talking to them. And then instead of making it about my feelings on a particular subject, they would get upset that I wasn't talking to them about it, and make it about them.*

Jay had described an often contentious relationship with mother. He grew up with both parents and had no siblings. He mentioned friends and extended family as a support:

*Jay (23 year old gay male): I guess phone communication was a little weird growing up. I just didn't do it. I was always out of the house. I talked to friends more than I talked to my cousins. And the times I did talk to my cousins it was like I went to go see my grandparents because my grandparents lived with my cousins.*

*I wouldn't really include them in my social, or support system then. But I feel like now if I called one of them and I needed support, then they'd be there.*

Cynthia discussed her support system at the time as she was still struggling with understanding her own sexuality:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *Younger, like elementary and high school, I probably like didn't have one because I wasn't out at all. I think I probably rely heavily on my friends for their support a lot, and they're really great about it. My one friend Cassie, she's been my best friend since we were 7. That's the kind of bond you ant really break with somebody, so I know that I have friends who are always going to be there for me if I need them.*

Also not fully being aware of her sexuality and certainly not out of the closet, Keri shared her description:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *Back at that period, I think like I felt very supported by people at church for the most part, just in general. But when it came to support in like actually exploring myself in both my sexual orientation as well as myself in general and truly exploring me, I don't think I had that great of a support system. I did have the support financially and emotionally from my mom, but it wasn't ... I also look back on that time and I never felt like I could truly be myself in any situation. Even among closest of friends at the time.*

She continued with a statement of feeling alone at times:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *Yeah when there were issues that came up, there were people. There were times during high school that I wasn't able to confide in anyone because I felt that the situations that were going on, like the people that I*

*would normally confide in, I couldn't confide in. And that caused issues early on in high school.*

While Keri's depiction of her support system came across as being less than comprehensive, Natalie told that she had less of a system in place:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *I mean... I feel like in high school I didn't exactly have a support system. Like 11 to 14, I would say that my support system was my family, but once I really started figuring out my sexuality and stuff, I kind of like became a shell for like maybe two years. So I didn't have a support system then, I would say. And I also was in a relationship at the time, and she was going through a lot of shit, so I ended up being her support system instead. You know what I mean? So I would say middle school, my support system was my family. High school, at least the first half of high school, not really anyone.*

I then asked Natalie if she had anyone at all that she could confide in at this time in her life:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *If I needed to? Probably my ex. If I needed to. But like usually it was her confiding in me. And I didn't want to put a lot on her, if that make sense.*

She also mentioned a sister from whom she had tried to seek support yet was surprisingly rejected:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *So I also came out to my sister twice. Once, I think I was actually 17, not 16 if that still counts. But okay, I had decided to talk with her*

*about what I was feeling, like in regards to... oh she's my twin by the way... Yeah she's my twin. But I had decided to talk to her about how I was feeling, and my attraction to women and stuff. So I just brought it up while we were in the bathroom, and she ended up storming out of the house. So I was just like, well that's not what I expected.*

Natalie's statement about her sister was very similar to the reaction of Mathew's sister in his interview. Like Natalie he reported feeling that he had hoped to find support from his sister:

*Mathew (24 year old gay male): I first told my sister. And I told her in the car. She was dropping me off somewhere and I was like, oh just so you know I'm gay. She balled, she cried. All I remember is she cried and then that was kind of it. And we haven't really talked about it since.*

David told that his mother was his support but as she dealt with her own health issues, he turned to friends and to himself:

*David (24 year old transmale): My mom was sick so I was kind of on my own when I was younger. She got really sick. So it was kind of like going in and out of the house myself. I pretty much had to stand up for myself most of the time. But the friends I did have would probably back me up most of the time. Unless like I was alone. So I guess I would say it was pretty supportive in terms of that. but mainly it was myself supporting myself.*

I asked David if he had other family members who helped him; he replied that they were not supportive in general but mentioned a cousin:

David (24 year old transmale): *When my grandfather and grandmother died, she was at the funerals, but we didn't really know each other. It was just like a pop up on Facebook, like hey I'm your first cousin. and she's like your profile's awesome, and she was pretty supportive of us. She actually questioned me about it in a positive way. She was just curious. Yeah. She's always been the laid back cousin that didn't fit in either. So we talk here and there on Facebook sometimes. She's pretty cool.*

Alex provided a summarizing statement as his family dynamics became much more complicated after his parent's divorce:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *I didn't feel like anybody in my family was there for me.*

## **LGBT+ Influences**

Several participants reported having had positive LGBT+ influences in their lives during their sexual development. Those participants who had a sexual minority family member reported more ease at being able to discuss their own sexuality. Having an LGBT+ confidant in addition to a companion animal provided an increased comfort in their development into adulthood. Two people told of having a gay sibling with whom they confided in and learned from:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *But growing up, my brother is uh.. gay...and uh that was. My parents were always really cool with it. He came out first, yeah.... We're pretty close. He and I have a very open relationship, like we talk about everything. But I don't see him at times. He just moved to Baltimore.*



*But when we see each other we chat. I feel like he's one person I can really open up to. And as a kid, he used to like tell my parents everything. And I was like I can't trust you. But we're cool now. And I think him coming out also had a lot to do with that too.*

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *I think she identifies as either bisexual or Pan. (a description of her sister with whom she grew up and was now her roommate)*

Both Sara Katherine and Cynthia also talked about having first cousins who identified as LGBT+. Both were currently supportive to the participants:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *Yeah I have one cousin who also lives in Baltimore. He's bisexual. I have a cousin who's maybe like ten years older than me, who I'm fairly close to. She's a lesbian. So I find it easier to talk to them, because they've had these kind of experiences in the family.*

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *My cousin especially has experimented a lot. She lived in San Francisco for a couple of years. So that's where you're gonna do it. So she's very very like... we're open about it and talk about it*

Alex mentioned gay family members who only recently learned of his sexual orientation. While he did not discuss his sexuality with them during his adolescence, their existence may have at least brought the concept of LGBT+ issues to heterosexual family members:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *Turns out, my mother's brother, and then my mother's other brother's son are both gay, so I recently found that out. My uncle's like over the moon. He thinks that we'll have a better relationship. He's*

*disappointed with my mother for not bridging the gap when I was younger, so that I could have had somebody to talk to, or somebody to guide me.*

While not related by blood or from the same household, David spoke about having close LGBT+ friends during his sexual development. David reported his LGBT+ friends as offering a buffer to feelings of isolation:

David (24 year old transmale): *My gay friend Alex. We came out at the same time. We went to our first pride together, so he was like my closest support... because we were both going through the same stuff, being bullied and coming out, and not sure who to come out to. He actually was in the next town over. But the way the streets were, it's literally if you cross the street it's the next town. So after school we would chill and talk about do we come out now, do we wait, how do we go about it? Yeah. Yeah. He helped me and I helped him. And eventually he told his mom. And eventually I told my mom. And both our parents already knew. So it was pretty easy for both of us to do it together.*

He then told about LGBT+ female students that he knew in school.

David (24 year old transmale): *I knew a couple bisexual women, girls, and lesbians. My ex-boyfriend's sister is a lesbian, and I knew her. I had a crush on her at the time too. So that was pretty easy because she was with popular kids. So once I knew I was chilling with a popular kid, it was fine. It was like no big deal. But if you weren't popular, and you're gay or whatever you identify yourself, they would pick on you. And I'm just like that doesn't make sense.*

James, on the other hand, did not know any LGBT+ people either in his household or in his community until he reached high school:

James (26 year old gay male): *There weren't any family members, and I really don't have a lot of LGBT friends. My first experience with meeting somebody who was out was in high school. So it didn't shock me or anything. I knew that that was something that people were, I just hadn't experienced it first hand.*

Molly reported finding LGBT+ role models and friends in college for the first time:

Molly (22 year old bisexual female): *My coach is female and married to a woman, and so after like my first date with my current girlfriend, I went up to my coach and was like I really like this girl, and I haven't done that before and I don't understand that, and I don't know why. And her and I we got coffee together, and we just talked about it. And she's like why are you worried about that, like why are you freaking out about that?*

She then spoke about forming a friendship with another lesbian peer at college to whom she came out at the same time the friend revealed her own sexuality:

Molly (22 year old bisexual female): *One of my good friends on the team. I was coming back from practice, and she was texting me. She was like I have something to say... I've been dating a girl for a few months now. I'm gay. I was like oh hey me too. It was like she came out to me the same day that I came out to her, which was pretty cool.*

Molly, who was an athlete in college, also spoke about competing in an event called the Pride Games. LGBT+ athletes from numerous universities compete in an Olympic-style event that promotes community pride and awareness. Keri revealed that LGBT+ student organizations at the collegiate level played a significant role in her sexual development:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *I joined the GSA on campus and found this great support system there....the other pinnacle moment I guess was when I went to this retreat at Bucknell called Common Ground. And it's a diversity emersion retreat, and each day addresses a different topic. We all stay away at this camp during fall break. And one day addressed race, one day was gender, one day was sexual orientation. And then basically throughout the day you would have all these discussions and activities, like how each interplays with the world and our society and the stereotypes that we have. Everything. And that was when .. that was my first time that I really wrote down and started really conceptualizing my sexuality. And was physically via writing recognizing what everything meant for myself. And for myself and my faith and everything combined. And I think a lot of the processing came through that retreat... That was probably other the major thing. And then when I started joining the GSA everything was like Whoa. Because we would have discussions on a weekly basis and have LGBTQ jeopardy. And I started to learn more about the culture and the history and everything. And that help in integrating into my identity as well.*

Because joining a Gay Straight Alliance, might have revealed his sexuality, Jay did not participate in his local GSA:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *Oh yeah yeah yeah GSA that's what it was. There was one of those at my high school. I wasn't apart of it. But I feel like there was a little bit of if I join it, then everyone will know. At that point I was still like, it's not good to be gay.*

Mathew worked as a college counselor at the time of his interview. His workplace was extremely open to diversity and inclusion of LGBT+ issues; this was contrary to his upbringing in a religious household and school that did not address issues of sexuality. Post college, he spoke about this aspect of his employment:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *Yeah. I mean I just started a new job, so it hasn't come up much. But I was actually thinking of this earlier this week because where I work, they're hiring a new person to be in charge of diversity and inclusion. And for the first time, like I've never really worked at a place that had a commitment to diversity and inclusion. So in my head I was actually thinking how I actually fall under that umbrella, as an LGBT individual, and I've been going to these interviews because I want to see that there is an officer that is looking out for LGBT individuals, people of color in the staff and in the work place. And I would feel very comfortable stating to my coworkers that I fall under that category, and that LGBT issues are important to me.*

### **Current Support System**

An important aspect of interviewing participants about their retrospective experiences regarding their sexual development is being able to also hear their present day stories and outlook. By interviewing young adults aged eighteen to twenty-five, my aim was to speak with participants who had begun to achieve some level of self-defined success. Whether the participant was in post-secondary school, working, or at least having had reached early

adulthood, every participant described having had passed through the period of adolescence and of self-discovery as an LGBT+ person. I had asked each participant about their past human and animal supports, and then I inquired as to how they would describe their current support systems. All participants reported having had moved beyond the turmoil of their adolescence into young adulthood but some expressed more comfort with their present supports than others. Keri described her friends and an aspect of her present day relationship with her mother:

*Keri (25 year old lesbian): Yeah so I have like a couple of close friends from undergrad that one lives in Philly one lives in Pittsburgh. And I also have another best friend from undergrad who lives in Indiana. The one in Indiana is queer. The one in Pittsburgh...just came out as a lesbian like a year ago. And then Emily who lives here in Philly, she's straight, but she's such a great ally. And on top of them I have...I call her my work wife. I have my work wife whose one of my close friends who I turn to a lot as one as well. And someone who I used to work with who works with a different company. She's also a therapist that I talk with a lot. And we're like really close and she asks me questions and everything. Those 5 are probably kind of my core group. I know I'm part of my mom's largest support system. I sometimes consider her part of my large support system, as well.*

Keri reported that her emotional support dog Mr. Seward was definitely a part of her current support system in addition to humans:

*Keri (25 year old lesbian): He helps me in general... I mean kind of with that closeness and petting. And he I don't know - I feel like he's in tune with my emotions sometimes because there are times when I get in my head of get really*

*upset when I am like crying and stuff, he even if he had been chewing on his favorite bone, like he'll come over and he's like licking up on my face. He loves to lick in general. And his licks help a lot in general. They normally come at the right time. Sometimes they're a little overwhelming because sometimes he does it when it's not the right time. But overall, even then I'm still like you're such a goof like get off. It'll make me laugh like in times when I'm not expecting to laugh and that helps a lot.*

Natalie had reported that her support system was much stronger in college than it had been during her formative years in middle and high school. At the collegiate level, she had found people who accepted her sexuality and provided friendship and guidance. In addition to human support, she added the benefit of a friend's cat to her support system:

*Natalie (20 year old lesbian): One of my friends here has a cat, and whenever I feel really shitty, I always go see that cat, and I always feel better. Which is why I know an emotional support animal will help me. But I can't get a cat because I'm allergic to cats.*

When describing her present supports, Cynthia noted friends and her sister who is also her roommate:

*Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): Very good. Especially with my sister and my friends. I mean my parents still support me. Especially since moving out. They'll just tell me randomly we're proud of you, like you're doing good and we miss you and stuff. And my friends are there if I'm having a bad day. I'll text my sister the longest paragraph and I'll just be like alright I'm good. I'm over it now,*

*I just needed to vent. And she'll be like alright cool or she'll be like do you need anything. She'll just stop and get me an icy or something if I'm having a bad day.*

In addition, she made sure to include her family dog Dakota:

*Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): Yeah. He's definitely like a brother to me. You know when people say like that dogs are your family members, he's definitely like a family member. He's more than just a dog.*

Sara Katherine noted a small but reliable support system at the present time:

*Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): I have a couple (people in support system). I always wish that I had more. Just because my mom is a very overwhelming presence in my life and I can't really talk to her about much. In terms of like emotional things. And my friends here, I'm close with two girls in my class. One of them is from that small town in Connecticut that is just very religious and close minded. She's getting better. And the other one just kind of likes to talk about herself a lot and rambles on. So I always kind of missed, I kind wish that I had more. And I have a lot of acquaintances in my life, but I talk to josh and Kevin, who are the two people I came out to first, the most. And they stuck with me through all of this so I think they're probably the most supportive people in my life.*

Her observations about her present support system were notable for the inclusion of both her dog Maggie and her guinea pig Mo:



Sara Katharine (24 year old bisexual female): *Yeah. Maggie especially. I wish that I got to see her more. I felt bad bringing her into the city because she's old and lives with my parents a lot. But yeah definitely. My mom and my dad get kind of upset when I come home and the first person I say hi to is Maggie. And I'll love on her for like a long time. And they're like why don't you give us a hug. So like Maggie's like yeah, my support system. And Mo is good to talk to. I was actually thinking about that recently where I was like oh I'm so glad that I got him. Because I think he did decrease a lot of the stress of starting that school and not having many friends here and just kind of caring for him and seeing him stick his little face out to get treats. It definitely helped with my adjustment here and feeling more comfortable with myself.*

David, while no longer in a school bullying situation, described his support system still as being limited:

David (24 year old transmale): *I have one particular friend that I've been friends with since I moved here, for like ten years ago. And I think if she wasn't around, the only other person I think that would support me 100 percent of the time is either my mom or the animals.*

Mathew also described a small circle of support:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *Not very present. Scattered. Because I build very strong one-on-one relationships with people. So in Philly when I'm here I have a best friend from college, who I'm very close with. But we don't see each as often as we used to. We used to see each other every day. We lived together. we would*

*share our days. Share our everything. And then I have my best friend, the one I came out to when I was 18. We're very close. He's like a brother. But we don't... and I know he's always there for support, but I don't open up to him quickly. And then I have another friend who I open up to, but she lives across the world. And so I don't really talk to her often.*

He offered more insight into his friendships:

*Mathew (24 year old gay male): So even though I know I receive unconditional love from him, I'm still hesitant to tap into that I think. But my friends who I've met later in my life, especially those two in particular, I think yeah.*

Nine of the participants included their companion animals as being part of their present support system. Molly gave a poignant example of including her animals as part of the definition of her family:

*Molly (21 year old bisexual female): Without a doubt. Yeah. It's definitely been my dog that gets me through when I have to be at home. When things are bad here, knowing that I'm an adult and I can do what I want I'm not going to let people treat me the way they do, so I'm going to get something else. That is definitely helpful, and I include them when I say my family, my snakes and my frogs.*

Mathew was the only participant who did not include an animal as part of his present supports:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *I wouldn't. I mean he's a dog at this point. I mean I love him like I love a dog, but he just doesn't feel like mine all the time. He feels like more like my mothers. Also we got him and then two years later I went off to college.*

## Fears

Issues of disclosure of one's sexual orientation or gender identity can bring fear to an LGBT+ person. The media often portrays LGBT+ teenagers that are disowned by their families, ridiculed by their communities, and shunned by churches, work places, or schools that perhaps used to be sources of support. Public accounts or stories about young LGBT+ people that were ostracized can bring fear into a sexual or gender minority youth:

James (26 year old gay male): *Of course I was worried that people weren't going to accept me. Or I was going to lose friends. Or lose. my family was going to be upset, and react negatively.*

Fear of losing support from loved ones or the status as a member of heterosexual privilege keeps some LGBT+ youth in the closet. Cynthia balanced that fear with the feeling of keeping her sexual orientation private.

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *I don't know. That's like why I haven't I think, because I'm scared. I feel they wouldn't... I know they wouldn't disown me or anything like that... But I think it's maybe like they would look at me differently. And I don't really want them to...Because of the negative thoughts they do seem to have. And I kind of feel like at this point it's not their business.*

David told additional fears based on his transgender status:

David (24 year old transmale): *Back then, I probably wouldn't have said anything to anybody in fear of me ruining my reputation. Now I try to talk to other people and educate other people about it. Because I'm more open, but I'm not like open.*

He continued to describe his fear about transphobia in society and the horrendous hate crimes that are inflicted upon transpeople:

David (24 year old transmale): *There's always that feeling though, like walking out the street and getting beaten or the worst of the worst. But I haven't gotten public discriminatory stuff yet. But probably because I pass most of the time as just a male. So I don't think that that will ever happen, but you can never be too sure. Because if someone opens their mouth, then you never know.*

Legislative aggression against trans-people and political discriminatory policies have impacted his outlook and ensuing fears:

David (24 year old transmale): *Yeah I always have to have a friend walk with me somewhere. Because I'm afraid someone's going to know I'm trans and wind up like murdering me or something. Because there's a lot of murders to trans people.... I'm scared to take public bathrooms. It's a lot of steps back. So a lot of times I don't even really go out very much to public.*

## **Threats**

By not being out of the closet or open about one's sexuality or gender identity, the threat of being exposed to others is quite real as told by two participants in particular. Trying to

preserve a secret can be held as leverage over the youth as a way to coerce their behavior; threats depict a power differential of some sort. When a person is partially out of the closet, there exists a potential threat for many that those whom know will tell others. Being a recipient of either a vague or explicit threat brought the same descriptions of anxiety. As an example, Molly relayed a threat from her mother to out her to her father:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *And then there was like one morning I was in bed and she was like if you don't tell your father then I'm going to.*

Jay told of how his love of his dogs had been turned into a threat regarding his behaviors. In particular, Jay would not come out as gay to his mother although his father is aware. He spoke about a time when his parents had threatened to get rid of his dogs while he was away at college when he ran into difficulty with managing a credit card:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *They were like we're going to get rid of your dog. And I was like for a monetary thing, you're going to do that, I'm literally never going to tell you that I'm gay unless I'm no longer alive or they're (the dogs) now with me. Because at this point I don't want my mom to be like oh well let's get rid of the dogs because this is a punishment for you.*

## **Bullying**

Homophobia or transphobia, while becoming less obvious in some communities, remain a standard of school and some family social systems. All participants witnessed external events directed at others though the use of companion animals was shared for those participants who were the direct recipients of bullying. Molly shared her own experiences with verbal bullying:

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *I think it started as petty high school drama. These two girls, I don't even know why we were fighting, but one of them was*

*going around saying like Molly is a lesbian, Molly is a lesbian. And I was like No I'm not, no I'm not. And it was just back and forth...*

Alex recalled seeing other LGBT+ students being bullied in high school. However, he was not a target. He shared that other students that exhibited cross-gender characteristics or presented with non-gender traditional clothing were bullied:

*Alex (22 year old gay male): I wasn't bullied. I was athletic. I saw the jockey guys pick on a smaller more effeminate, to-be- gay student, classmate of ours. They didn't pick on me. I don't know if it's because I exhibited more of a masculine presentation. And in high school all my close friends knew that I was gay, and I knew that none of them would ever say a word. There were groups of boys and girls that picked on everybody. But I saw somebody in particular get targeting for being gay. By our senior year he was doing his own thing. He was wearing makeup. I think he wore the Ugg boots that were for girls at the time. He never was assaulted, but he got scoffed at, and verbally abused. But I never... I could be sitting with a group of my friends, and the jockey guys could walk by and they could make a remark about everybody sitting at the table except me because they knew that I had to go to track practice afterward and that I wouldn't tolerate it.... I stood up for my close friends. I thought at least I'm being looked over. Or at least I have a tough enough exterior, that they don't want to bother with me.*

Participants shared that in high school bullying based on transgender identity existed perhaps even more strongly than bullying directed at a person's sexual orientation:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *The individual who identified as trans in high school, she was f to m. but she wasn't using male pronouns at that time. Now he is using male pronouns. But didn't feel comfortable in high school. But he dressed like a boy in high school. Just even that was there was so many negative reactions to that. And he got beat up a lot.*

David first came out as a lesbian in high school before he realized his gender identity was male. He shared how he endured with bullying for multiple reasons:

David (24 year old transmale): *I got bullied a lot. Before I came out, I came out as a lesbian first, and some of the kids on my street found out. Then it got to the school. And some of the kids in there that grew up on the more anti-gay kind of family, didn't take that too kindly, so there was a lot of bullying at school and on the streets... I left(New Jersey town) in 9th grade because of the bullying and I didn't want to go to school. So my mom finally pulled me out. But they would push me into lockers and stuff. And I would tell the teachers. The teachers wouldn't do very much. They would just blame me. Like well this person did that so basically it was send them to the principal. But that was all that really would happen.... if you weren't popular, and you're gay or whatever you identify yourself, they would pick on you. And I'm just like that doesn't make sense...Because if they knew you were in special Ed class or something, you were getting crap anyway. But it was worse when I came out. It was like oh you're slow and you're gay, so we get to pick on you even ten times harder.*

David reported that while he is no longer in a school situation, he still endured cyber-bullying from social media:

David (24 year old transmale): *Mainly my threats come from the internet. But that's the price of social media. And if you put your business out there, you're going to get some backlash.*

He then mentioned how his cat McGee helps him cope with bullying on the internet:

David (24 year old transmale): *Yeah, sometimes I'll turn my head and be like McGee, this person's being mean to me. And they'll go Meow. I'm like, yup.*

## **Chapter 9: Mental Health**



LGBT+ youth face daily pressures to act in a certain way or not to disclose their true identities to others out of safety. They also look to find a way to balance negative influences with trying to form a healthy self- image. The rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation have all been shown to be higher amongst LGBT+ youth than their heterosexual counterparts (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Bratsis, 2015; D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005; Hatzenbuehler, Duncan, & Johnson, 2015; McDermott et al., 2008; Olson et al., 2016; Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Snapp, et al., 2015). This section explores the participants’ experiences with mental health issues and their usage of companion animals to assist. This chapter addresses the themes of Self-Awareness, Self-Esteem, Unconditional Love, and Pets Changed Me.

## **Self-Awareness**

Previously, participants had described their sexual development and when they first noted feeling different than the heterosexual norm of society. Regarding a self- awareness, I asked the participants to describe how or if they learned to accept their sexuality. James shared his inner struggle about being gay:

James (26 year old gay male): *I just was trying to reconcile it for myself and get through it to a point where I could be...I needed to be okay with it. I think that’s what I was most focused on. It’s kind of what I’m still most focused on, is making sure I’m okay and being okay with that.*

He had questioned himself but then reached an epiphany:

James (26 year old gay male): *I did for a little bit. But I think because it was already in the back of mind, I wasn't very surprised by it. I really wasn't...it didn't... it wasn't just a snap one way or the other. I kind of came to a realization. It was like okay. I guess it clicked is what I mean.*

Despite pressures from her family, Natalie came out to herself and some others while in high school. Not much time had elapsed from when she first realized her feelings:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *yea, I'm gay, yea*

She came out to the rest of her family only several months before this interview:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *I decided to come out on my own terms because I was having a lot of anxiety and depression revolving around being in the closet and so I chose to come out over Thanksgiving break.*

While Sara Katherine came out to herself at a later age and some time after she had realized her sexual feelings:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *Yeah I guess I came out and admitted it to myself around like the summer before vet school at the end of college.*

These interview excerpts on self-awareness led into a discussion on self-image and self-esteem. How each participant saw themselves directly influenced the value placed on their own worth.

## Self- Esteem

The pressures of being a sexual or gender minority can often make youth feel less than worthy of praise. A unique factor from having companion animals was that taking care of a pet was spoken of as positively impacting one's self-esteem. Having felt like less than a heterosexual counterpart about one's self-esteem can have some lasting effects as shared by Mathew:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *And so often to this day, I lack confidence left and right, but there was something.*

Mathew reported how his lack of confidence could be tied to his inability to discuss aspects of being gay with his family; this had affected his overall self-image as others' disapproval had an influence over how he perceived himself. Earlier he had shared about his heterosexist school and church environments. Mathew then elaborated on his mother's reaction to his homosexuality when he told her and his father and then how this has affected his ability to discuss himself with them:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *Bad. Her and my dad came down to talk to me a couple times. We had very uncomfortable conversations, which I'm not good with uncomfortable conversations. So it mostly when I would agree to talk, and then they would ask a question. I remember one time we were sitting talking, and they asked Have you had sex? And I told them that I felt that was an inappropriate question and I told them yes. And then I wound up leaving. Things were just very emotional for a few months. I went home for my mother's birthday and then somehow things got heated and I wound up walking out on that. And then we stopped talking about it. And so we don't talk about it anymore.*

Congruent with his upbringing, he added that even at the present time:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *I still haven't brought up my sexuality again.*

Sara Katherine told of how being bisexual affected her self-image at the time but how she was able to use technology to come to better terms with her self-identity:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *Well I feel like now I know why I had all of those feelings. I feel like I have an answer to like the confusing feelings I felt back then. I'm also, now with social media, I was able to actually find people to go on dates with and actually try do things with girls and meet up with them. I realize that oh I like this, like this makes sense. And back then I couldn't. and I was way too afraid to. Because I was living at home with my parents, and because these apps didn't exist. So I definitely feel more confident and more like self-aware now.*

Mathew and Sara Katherine were not unique in their struggles, but a few participants spoke about their companion animals as tools to help them cope with issues of poor self-esteem and lack of self-awareness. Several participants elaborated on the importance of their animals on their mental health:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *I never really thought about it... I mean I definitely think they helped it in a lot of ways. Definitely in the sense that like me caring for them helped them live happy lives, and be happy and healthy. But also in a sense that like everyone, mostly everyone with a heart thinks that animals are cute and they're like "OMG you have a dog. It's the cutest things ever. And I wanna hang out with you and your dog. And pet your guinea pig."*

*And that helped me like make friends and talk to people and just walking around the neighborhood with the dog... I mean I guess it did affect it. I mean they were kind of reliant on me for all those things. And so, I don't know, I like to consider myself a really good friend. And I've so many times gone out of my way for others when they wouldn't necessarily do the same. And I think that having pets growing up has definitely helped me in that way.... Oh maybe.it definitely helped when.. so like I would talk to Zoey... now I just write in a journal, but it kind of helped me organize thoughts to talk to her. So then I could you know sort through them and then maybe be more rational around people that I wanted to talk to...my parents and friends. And kind of.. I mean I guess so. I feel like having pets in general has taught me empathy and caring. Having to walk them having to feed them.*

*Keri (25 year old lesbian): I think Hayley (dog) helped me to come to realize that I could.. it felt like I could be okay on my own, is part of what she gave me. Even at the young age of thirteen. It's part of what I think I learned from her the most. And then Brassy (dog) was like you can be whatever you want. That's just like her attitude. I kind of just always felt that way around her. And I think in building a relationship and being able to be with Brassy, it helped me feel more confident with my real self out in the world, which is part of the reason I would go with her, because I could be out in the world and be myself.*

Alex added how his animals benefitted his view of self-importance:

Alex (22 year old gay male): *It made me feel very important because I fed and took care of everything up until the end of high school. It wasn't like a chore. It was like I chose to. It was like my form of privilege or hobby.*

Natalie's view on her self-esteem was helped immensely by her dog Snickers:

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *So I had a dog named Snickers for a couple of years too. He was just a foster dog though. So once we found the right home for him, we gave him away. But I feel like both him and Rex kind of just adored me. So I knew I wasn't a complete piece of shit. I was like I can't be that horrible if dogs like me. That's it.*

David provided a positive description from the symbiotic relationship he had with animals regarding his view of self-value:

David (24 year old transmale): *Pretty independent. It makes me feel like I have something ahead of me. I'm helping this little cat or this little dog, okay there's hope for me. If they can make it through the world I can make it through the world. That's kind of how I've always looked at it.*

### **Unconditional Love from Animals**

One of the few themes that participants universally reported in each interview was that of unconditional love from animals. Regardless of how specifically a participant described their relationship with companion animals, the non-judgement from animals was mentioned consistently. Several participants stated the affirmative as if this should be common knowledge:

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *Yeah.....yeah I would. I mean with the dogs that I've been exposed to, for sure.*

Molly (21 year old bisexual female): *Without a doubt. Yeah. It's definitely been my dog that gets me through when I have to be at home.*

James (26 year old gay male): *Yeah absolutely.*

Alex (22 year old gay male): *They were always there.*

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *Yes. They wouldn't judge me.... Just because of the unconditional love. There's not a bad dog on the planet.*

Cynthia went on to speak more about the unconditional love from animals that benefit LGBT+ youth:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *I think it is a really good idea, though, to have them work with the LGBTQ adolescent., because they don't judge and they love everybody and they don't look at a person and think like Ew that' persons gay. They're not going to care at all. Like how I said earlier, I do feel like they've help made me more compassionate and stuff. Like it could probably help them. I think it's really good for everyone. That's why I wanted to do this. And I also want to work with service dogs eventually.*

Jay spoke about his view on the unconditional and reciprocal love from dogs:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *Dogs are like those animals, they never care what people think about them. As long as you give them food and attention, they're not going to react negatively, unless it's negative attention. But for the most part, give*

*them love and care and they'll reciprocate. So I think that was just another reason that I was like, wait, dogs can do it, why can't humans do it. We're supposed to be evolutionarily favored. Yet we're the ones who are also the only species capable of inflicting harm on ourselves, others, the planet, and everyone else.*

James shared this view on dogs from his experiences:

*James (26 year old gay male): Because you have this other living thing that again just loves you, doesn't care, none of it matters to them. If you're a good person they know that too, and they'll love you anyway. And it is nice to have that. It's a little confidence boost I suppose in a way, that you... through it all you have somebody who's going to just kind of be there. Sometimes all you need is just literally someone to be there. So I do think that helped. In knowing that I could come home and see her. that it would be okay. That no matter what happens throughout the day it's fine. The house was still there, she was still there. it was all good.*

Specific to unconditional love, he continued with his thought:

*James (26 year old gay male): They're not going to judge you. They're not going to love you any less for something someone said throughout the day that made you feel crappy, or at you did to make somebody else feel crappy. It's that unconditional love. It's nice to be reminded of that occasionally. Because I know I forget it. I'm sure many other people do too.*



David shared his thoughts on the unconditional love from animals and how this might be especially helpful for LGBT+ youth:

David (24 year old transmale): *I just think that animals are really good for LGBT people because they're never going to judge you. Now I can't say okay you're straight and you have an animal, but I don't feel.. I feel they're more attached to different atmosphere around that person and just the LGBT community... because they're... like I said, you being in another female and female, and you bring in a straight couple, the cats probably going to look at the lesbian couple like huh, and then go over to them. Because most of the time I see animals and gay people or bi people or any sexual orientation, I mainly see animals go toward the more different people.*

He summarized his heartfelt view on this non-judgmental aspect of being with animals:

David (24 year old transmale): *I'd rather always have a pet. Cause you never know what's going to happen. I'd rather not be alone completely than not have someone to love me or something like that. I'd rather have an animal always there, that I know that they're going to support me no matter what.*

## **Pets Changed Me**

The final theme from the interviews was asking participants to look at the present. I asked if companion animals had changed them:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *Yeah I think growing up, having pets definitely helped me feel like I could have an impact on other people.*

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *Probably, yeah. I mean I still... when I was going through the stage... now I'm not official, but exclusive with someone and when I was going through the dating stage with different people I would bounce off my sexuality with him too. And that has I don't know it always opened up the floor like oh yeah I'm going to go to Emily about this now. And now I'm able to more easily talk with other people about everything.*

Natalie (20 year old lesbian): *I feel like just being a pet owner makes you a much more empathetic person, I feel like. So I feel like a lot of my ability to be responsible and take care of people and just be empathetic has stemmed from my relationship with Rex, if that makes sense.*

James (26 year old gay male): *I feel like it made me more compassionate, and again, more realistic about a lot of things. Not just being a pet owner or a pet parent.*

James continued with a look into what his future might hold for him:

James (26 year old gay male): *I guess because I still feel very much in transition in that way, even though I've long since finished college. I don't feel like that's necessarily settled or even really...I still don't really feel like I have a whole lot of direction that way. But I guess in some ways I still I would like to do something with animals some perhaps one day. I don't know what capacity. I don't know... a*

*whole litany of red tape there to get to somewhere good. But it does cross my mind. I do think about it.*

Cynthia pondered about my question and first answered the following in retrospect:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *Probably, yeah. I think maybe.... definitely when I was younger, I was very cold to people, and I would be kind of mean on purpose. And make mean jokes and try to physically fight my sister and stuff. But like getting a dog I feel like it made me so much more like okay with being a comforting person and having compassion and love. And focusing on the good things instead of the bad.*

She then thought about the present day compared to her younger self:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *Yeah probably. It probably opened me up to talking to strangers if they're walking their dogs in the streets, and asking them questions, and that sort of thing. It's like a good conversation topic. So I think it probably made me more open and less shy, and it's easy to talk about your dog, like I can do it for hours.*

Her final statement on this question reflected her self-reflection on her lifelong bond with animals and how she would like to see herself:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *I feel like if I got my own dog, I would feel more important.*

## **Chapter 10: Discussion**

My interest in studying this subject and population began for several key personal reasons. I had been continually distraught over social isolation and hopelessness for LGBT+ youth. As a member of the LGBT+ community, I agree with the social media campaign “It Gets Better” aimed at sexual and gender minority youth facing real time obstacles and blockades to self acceptance. Life can indeed get better in many ways, but I wanted to focus on learning which untapped tools can help struggling youth reach this future point.

My role as a researcher entailed me finding ways to incorporate my twenty years as a social worker, lifelong love of animals, and being a gay man with objectivity and an investigative eye. My ten participants shared their own struggles through personal narratives that offered a genuine richness capable of captivating this active listener; through data analysis after the interviews, I relived their stories again and sought to find common codes, themes, and patterns. From initially re-reading the transcripts of each interview, I composed I-Poetry and then coded each interview line by line. These interviews were not client assessments like those which I have performed for years and my role was not one as a clinician. The first internal struggle that I encountered was in one of my earliest interviews with the participant Keri. She was sharing a heartfelt and painful memory of her dog being euthanized and started to cry. My initial impulse was to be the social worker and explore her grief in a comforting manner; I stopped myself and remembered my role as a researcher. Giving Keri a moment to collect her emotions, she wanted to continue the interview and then we proceeded. My background may have biased me in a manner, but at the same time ensured that I would not be a receptive yet emotionless inquisitor.

After my analysis of the interviews, I revisited my initial research questions. Though in a semi-structured interview format, I used many probes and follow-up questions uniquely tailored to the answers given by the participant. Four research questions guided each interview:

- What was your experience like as an LGBT+ youth growing into an adult?

The ten interviews painted vivid descriptions of what each participant's experiences during sexual development looked like. Each shared a detailed account of how they realized that they were different from heterosexual norms of society and how external pressures affected their self views. Heterosexism played a significant influence for all of the youths with homophobia or transphobia marking the decision to come out whether fully, partially, or not at all. This period of self discovery, confusion, and doubt was noted as a being tumultuous in some fashion by every participant. Several interviews alluded to the need for both formal as well as unstructured mental health services at this time.

- As a sexually developing youth, what was your social support system like?

Responses ranged from having many potential supports to feeling totally alone during sexual development. A discussion of each participant's family and high school situations followed this theme. No one reported their high schools as being nurturing to LGBT+ youth. Some reported bullying and both verbal and physical condemnations towards sexual and gender minority students, while others shared that peer based discrimination was minimal. Interviews included detailed descriptions of each participant's home life during their adolescence and when applicable, their families' reaction to their LGBT+ status (if out). All participants included their companion animals in their support system during this period. All ten participants reported

feeling not able to confide in other humans for support at some point during their youth while every person felt that animals were part of their larger support systems.

- What has your experience been like with pets?

The sheer joy of speaking about companion animals shone on each participant's facial expressions. After sharing about potentially turbulent times as an emerging LGBT+ youth, the mood softened in each interview. Every participant shared their lifelong love of animals and described their first memories of a pet through their sexual development. The youth shared descriptions of their bonds with animals as all participants reported seeking and receiving emotional comfort from their animals. For eight participants, talking to their companion animals provided another dimension to their relationships as many reported emotive talking and not just speech for play or giving directions to the animal. Two participants reported that they came out of the closet to their animals.

- How did your experiences with animals as an LGBT+ youth affect you now as a young adult?

Every participant shared stories of how companion animals affected them as they grew into adulthood. Eight participants reported how their animals helped them to develop stronger self-esteem, self-awareness, and empathy towards others. The love of animals led several participants to pursue careers with this interest. Two participants were currently in veterinary school, one was an undergraduate potentially looking at becoming a veterinarian, and one participant worked full-time caring for dogs.

### **Relationship with Companion Animals Changed**

For each of the participants, the importance of companion animals in their lives became emphatically clear at different points of the interview. Regarding sexual development, I asked if their relationship with their companion animals changed during or after their sexual development. Several participants shared that they never thought about this but could retrospectively see how their relationships did change. The following interview excerpts highlight this summation. Jay spoke about how as he grew into a young adult, his outlook on pet care responsibilities evolved also:

Jay (26 year old gay male): *Maybe. I think it was - I never really thought of it that way. But my view of her I guess did change as I got older. I think became maybe more self-aware. And more aware of what it meant to be a pet parent if you will. I guess as I matured and she got older and needed more help, it put a lot of things into perspective.*

Keri reported that same feature as Jay, in that she felt more responsible for her dogs as she entered adolescence and then young adulthood. Kerri added another component of being able to use her dog to escape uncomfortable situations at home:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *I think yeah I felt especially yeah — when I was a small child, and like with Hans, I loved him to death but I wasn't that responsible for him so - and it was more of oh yeah he's around And then Hayley was more like oh you're part of the family. And then Brassy was the dog after that; my mom still has...she just has so much character. But she was a lot of the time was part of my excuse — because of what was going on I never really liked being in the house that frequently. And so I would always find ways to be busy....Brassy would be my*

*excuse to get out of the house. So I would be like let's go walk. Let's go walk. We can go do that.*

Natalie also expressed that her relationship with her dog changed but discovered something about her motivations by retrospectively examining this period of her life. She realized that having her dog with her as she questioned her sexuality was purposeful:

*Natalie (20 year old lesbian): I would say yes, because that's when he started coming up and sleeping in my room. Wow I never thought of this. But now that I think about it, I feel like a lot of reasons that I would have him come up to my room was because I didn't want to be alone at night, and I also just didn't know who to talk to. Oh I just had a dog in my room!*

Other participants did not think that their relationships with their companion animals changed during this time. Jay did not report a change in the quality of his relationships:

*Jay (23 year old gay male): I don't think so. I've always loved animals.*

Keri concurred but also added her thought of what her animals' opinion of her homosexuality would be in a different interpretation of my question. She did not feel that her companion animals looked at her any differently as she developed sexually:

*Keri (25 year old lesbian): I wouldn't say it did. Probably because if they were people who could talk, I think they would be totally cool with it.*

In addition to the previous report of how David asked his cat about his appearance before dates, he spoke about his animals' viewpoint of him before and during his sexual development. He also interpreted my question as to how his animals perceived the sexual orientation and gender identity of himself and others that entered his household:



David (24 year old transmale): *No, everything pretty much stayed the same. Sometimes if I had brought over a girl or boy or something, the dog or cat- whoever I had at the time. I mean they knew like okay there's two different sexes coming in the house. They'll kind of keep their distance, but then eventually they'll warm up to the other person or me more. It was a little weird. They always like seemed to know. It's like they know.*

### **Selfobjects and Attachment to Companion Animals**

Kohut's Self Psychology and Bowlby's Attachment Theory entail many detailed descriptions about objects that human use in their identity formation. Types of attachment or the fulfillment uses of selfobjects comprise these psychodynamic theories. As I conceptualized this dissertation, I sought to hear how LGBT+ youth may have used companion animals as objects for their own growth and how they viewed their animals. As could be assumed about a general pet owning population, some descriptions started as basic accounts of animal friendship:

Sara Katherine (24 year old bisexual female): *We got Zoey. She's a husky lab mix. She was probably like my best friend. I loved her.*

Others described their relationships as more like being a parent to a child:

David (24 year old transmale): *I think all animals are kind of like children. You got to bathe them sometimes. You got to pick up after them. You got to feed them. So probably more like children than anything. But they can be your best friend too.*

Mathew (24 year old gay male): *Yeah. I think so. Especially at home. Because she was very much like family.*

Using Self Psychology theory, all selfobject fulfillment helps a person to attain a level of healthy narcissism. The twinship fulfillment of a selfobject need pertains to a peer or sibling type of relationship with an object; it is not a hierarchical relationship like between a youth and an idealized parental image. The subject or person seeks emotional stimulation on an equivalent level to themselves in order to receive interpersonal feedback for development. All of the participants reported traits in their relationships with companion animals that were congruent as fulfilling selfobject or attachment object needs. Eight of the ten interviews included several strong characteristics of twinship selfobject fulfillment. Cynthia shared her view of her dog as a peer or sibling:

Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): *Yeah. He's definitely like a brother to me. You know when people say like that dogs are your family members, he's definitely like a family member. He's more than just a dog.*

James reported a similar feeling of his dog's relationship with him. Venus lived with him and his family during his adolescence:

James (26 year old gay male): *I guess more a friend or a sibling than a child. Because I guess she was too big for me to view as a child. It makes sense in my head. Yeah she was a friend. Always was. And I guess a sibling in a way. Being an only child, there's only so much you can blame on the dog. Not that I would blame her for things. But I don't have any siblings so these were kind of my*

*siblings in a way. Because they were the other living beings in the house who weren't my parents.*

As a companion animals cannot talk back with words, a unique quality may exist for some people that use animals to fulfill the twinship selfobject needs. James continued to describe the joy he felt from his dog Venus on a peer level:

*James (26 year old gay male): Yeah a little bit. It was more just wanting to sit with her and be with her. I always joked, my Valentine's day plans always consisted of me sitting on the couch eating ice cream with the dog. Which is still pretty good. It sounds pretty good to me.*

I encountered two participants who mentioned a unique desire due to the close attachment that they felt with their current dogs. They both spoke about wanting to emotionally marry their dogs:

*Cynthia (25 year old pansexual female): And they're like my life, I'm obsessed with them. I'm mostly obsessed with, this sounds terrible but, Dakota is like the one for me. If he was a person, I would marry him because he's like the best dog I've ever met. And I've met a lot of dogs.*

*Jay (23 year old gay male): I put Cherry before I put everyone else on this planet. And everyone knows that. In fact my friends said that if Cherry were human, I would probably be married by now. I was like honestly, even though Cherry's a female, yes I would probably be married to her by now.*

Every participant who wanted to be interviewed for this study had self-identified as being close to animals, but Cynthia and Jay surprised me by their statements of marriage to their dogs. There were no sexual overtones whatsoever in these statements, but rather heartfelt expressions of attachment with their animals. Two of the participants also demonstrated mirroring characteristics in their bonds with their dogs. Jay went a bit further when describing being emotionally enmeshed with Cherry:

Jay (23 year old gay male): *I can try to be more like Cherry and apparently I went really far with it, because now my friends think I am her.*

However he was not the only person who described sharing a para-spiritual existence with their dog. At the end of her account of having her dog Hayley euthanized, Keri shared this same sentiment:

Keri (25 year old lesbian): *I was thirteen. And that hurt so much. Because Hayley was probably my favorite of all of our dogs. I mean Hans, I loved Hans just because he the one that I grew up with you know. But Hayley was the one that was the most heartbreaking because of having to put her down when she wasn't an aggressive dog really. But also because I always felt connected to her. At the time, in high school, I was a lot quieter than I am now and being more myself now. And I always related to her on that level because she was a quiet and slightly timid dog sometimes and I always felt like that was part of me.*

The statements from both Keri and Jay suggest a mirroring function of their dogs as selfobjects. Both accounts moved away from twinship to more of a grandiose fulfillment of their dogs as selfobjects. I had not expected to hear that several participants viewed their animals as

extensions of themselves, but ultimately was not surprised in that their attachments were reported as being strong on an intrapsychic level. Clinically the significance of companion animals for LGBT+ youth varied in the individual accounts from each participant yet overall selfobject fulfillment pervaded in each experience. Companion animals played multiple and integral roles in the development of each participant into adulthood.

### **Limitations**

While I was trying to gather many diverse voices for my study, there were several limitations to my strategy. I did not know who or how many individuals would have wanted to participate. I met my initial goal of ten interviews and saturation of themes was met through hearing the unique experiences of each individual. Another concern was that I would have an overabundance of people from certain parts of the LGBT+ community but not from others. I used multiple recruitment sites from throughout the region to also help to alleviate this concern, but I do not know if societal stigma regarding gender identity may have limited participation from transgender or non-binary gender individuals. Regarding language, I decided to limit participation to speakers of English. I conducted the personal interviews myself and the use of a translator in a semi-structured interview was not feasible or appropriate to my design. My proficiency in several languages was not equivalent to fluency and therefore did not allow for full expression in an interview.

Further limitations of the study included several features common to most qualitative forms of qualitative research:

- 1) The qualitative nature of the study is not generalizable to other LGBT+ populations in that statistical data was not be produced nor was a hypothesis proven. In depth

analysis of individual experiences from participants was sought to enrich current professional knowledge and to inspire unconventional thought into possible therapeutic knowledge for the profession of social work. This study did not offer quantitative data that can be generalized to other populations but rather a scholarly examination of individual experiences.

- 2) Ten participants took part in this small scale qualitative study. The number was purposely kept to a small number as detailed personal experiences were sought. The number of interviews did not produce quantitative data beyond basic demographics.
- 3) The interviews took place in metropolitan Philadelphia. All of the participants had spent the majority of their lives in the Middle Atlantic region of the United States and most had lived in suburban areas of either Pennsylvania or New Jersey. With the exception of the one participant who had grown up in Southwestern rural Pennsylvania, the participants had lived in areas that offered legal protections for LGBT+ people and had legislative policies in place that embrace sexual and gender diversity. This political climate would not be the same in different regions of the country or world; the willingness and safety to be open on discussing LGBT+ issues might indeed be variable due to location.
- 4) Convenience and snowball sampling did not allow for random participation from the community at large. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria mandated these forms of recruitment as did the desire to keep participation to approximately ten interviews.

- 5) Respondents to the recruitment flyer all had lived with companion animals in their households. The inclusion criteria for the study asked for participants only who had a strong connection with companion animals and thusly a bias was in place regarding recruitment. Concurrently another bias was in place as all participants had to self- identify as LGBT+; only people who were open enough to disclose their sexuality or gender identity to the interviewer chose to enroll in the study.
- 6) Geographically as recruitment took place in Philadelphia area with a heavy emphasis on college campuses, the suburban background of eighty percent of the participants does not represent any larger LGBT+ population as a whole. Recruitment attempts were made for participants also from an urban background but elicited few responses.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

From this small-scale qualitative study, further research is merited and recommended to better understand the bond between companion animals and LGBT+ individuals in the pursuit of augmented treatment tools to combat isolation and negative self-image. Participants in this study provided rich descriptions of their own life experiences that trigger interest in pursuing a better understanding of animal bonding. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods are recommended.

Qualitatively a replicated study in a different region might produce different findings as external factors on an individual's experiences would suggest alterations based on environment. I purposely sought young adults for my study as they would have passed through the tumultuous

period of initial sexual development but would not be far removed in years from that time. Direct phenomenological work with LGBT+ individuals of varying ages could provide further insight; a study with current LGBT+ adolescents may provide a better current view of the struggles of growing up as a sexual or gender minority and how they use companion animals in their lives. Or conversely, a study on older LGBT+ adults that encompasses their life experiences with companion animals could provide a different form of retrospection that encompasses additional generations.

Only one transgender person was part of this study yet many unique features of a transphobic experience were reported in his interview. A follow up study specifically with transgender youth and companion animals could dive deeper into these themes and would allow for a much more individualized study. The twinship and mirroring aspects of selfobject fulfillment also merit follow up research to further examine the Self Psychology implications of companion animals for LGBT+ youth.

Quantitative research for both social work and sociology could also benefit the respective fields regarding this phenomenon. A quasi-experimental format or use of survey tools and scales with a larger population could potentially measure the self-defined strength and nature of an LGBT+ youth's attachment with animals or other humans. Potentially studies could also look into the different relationships that LGBT+ youth have with companion animals as compared to a heterosexual population.

## **Conclusions**

My questions regarding hearing the experiences of LGBT+ youth and their bonds with companion animals were answered yet many questions remain for further work. This was the



first study of which I am aware that looked specifically at this population regarding their relationships with animals for support. I will forever be grateful to each of the participants who bravely and genuinely shared their life stories with me; I will not forget the connection made with each person. Some of the findings surprised me as the semi-structured interview format allowed for each participant to tell their stories in detail. Regardless of the depth of human support reported in each interview, the relationship with companion animals was indeed significant to every participant. I learned from first-hand accounts how the struggles over self-acceptance and self-esteem impacted each person's development into adulthood and how companion animals served as forms of support as well as buffers against isolation and external forces. This study allowed me to hear personal experiences that crossed beyond written media accounts from LGBT+ youth and in particular, I gained a much clearer understanding of family homophobia and transphobia.

I had expected to some degree to hear about individual experiences with the twinship selfobject fulfillment qualities of companion animals, but was surprised at additional reported features. Particularly the participants who reported a mirroring capability with their dogs provided me with experiences that I did not expect to hear. The attachment to animals proved to be present in every interview even for those youth who reported strong attachments to their families and human support systems.

My overall hope from this dissertation is that interest is now sparked for future mental health practitioners and anthropomorphic researchers to closely look at the bonds between LGBT+ youth and animals. Nonjudgmental affection and support from other humans can be rare and extremely difficult to find. Unconditional love from animals is omnipresent.

Appendix 1. Recruitment Flyer

## **Interested in Participating in a Penn Research Study?**



I am seeking people who would like to be interviewed for my social work dissertation at Penn.

If you are

- ☐ LGBT or a sexual minority
- ☐ Between 18 and 25 years old
- ☐ Have had a strong relationship with pets throughout your life

You may be eligible to take part.

Participants will

- Be interviewed about their experiences and views for about one hour in private
- Receive a \$10 Wawa Gift Card

Confidentiality will be protected and interviews can be conducted in either Philadelphia or Voorhees, NJ. If interested please email Jeff at

[jinjef@upenn.edu](mailto:jinjef@upenn.edu) or call 856-298-0589

Appendix 2. Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of the Research Study: The Clinical Significance of Companion Animals for LGBT+ Youth

Protocol Number:

Principal Investigator: Ram A. Cnaan, 3701 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104, 215-898-5504, cnaan@upenn.edu

Co-investigator: Jeffrey N Jin, 1002 Gregorys Way, Voorhees, NJ 08043 856-298-0589, jinjef@upenn.edu

Emergency Contact: Jeffrey N. Jin, 1002 Gregorys Way, Voorhees, NJ 08043 856-298-0589, jinjef@upenn.edu

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This is not a form of treatment or therapy. It is not supposed to detect a disease or find something wrong. Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate or not to participate there will be no loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Before you make a decision you will need to know the purpose of the study, the possible risks and benefits of being in the study and what you will have to do if decide to participate. The research team is going to talk with you about the study and give you this consent document to read. You do not have to make a decision now; you can take the consent document home and share it with friends, family doctor and family.

If you do not understand what you are reading, you may choose to not continue. Please ask the researcher to explain anything you do not understand, including any language contained in this form. If you decide to participate, a copy will be given to you. Keep this form, in it you will find contact information and answers to questions about the study. You may ask to have this form read to you.

### What is the purpose of the study?

\* The purpose of the study is to learn about effective the experiences of LGBT+ youth with companion animals as sources of social support during sexual development. This study is being conducted for a dissertation with the Doctorate of Clinical Social Work program at the University of Pennsylvania School of Practice and Policy.

### Why was I asked to participate in the study?

You are being asked to join this study because you

- \* Self-identify as LGBT+
- \* Are between the ages of 18 and 25
- \* Have reported a strong history of bonding with a pet
- \* Presently reside in metropolitan Philadelphia/ Southern New Jersey or are a student in this area.

### How long will I be in the study?

\* Participation in the study will take place in one interview session. Each interview will last approximately 1 to 1 1/2 hour.

### Where will the study take place?

\*For your convenience you will be asked to come to the location most accessible for you — either the LGBT Center at the University of Pennsylvania or the researcher's office at 201 Laurel Oak Road, Voorhees, NJ. Appointment times will be made individually to meet your scheduling needs.

### What will I be asked to do?

\* After agreeing to participate in the study you will meet privately with the researcher for a semi-structured interview. You will be asked a series of questions pertaining to your LGBT+ status, social support, and companion animals or pets. Both retrospective and current information will be sought. The interview will be recorded and the researcher will take notes.

### What are the risks?

\* There is a potential risk involved with discussing social isolation, heterosexism, grief pertaining to animals, and psychosocial stressors. This may include recalling painful experiences of sexual identity formation, homophobia, transphobia, mental anguish and depression, substance usage, and past suicidal thoughts. A Licensed Social Worker (LSW) will conduct all individual interview sessions. He is specifically trained and licensed to perform interventions involving these risks. The interviewer will refer you for any additional mental health support services if needed. Any active report of threat to oneself will be reported for immediate crisis intervention and study activity will therefore cease.

\* A breach of confidentiality pertaining to public disclosure of sexual identity, embarrassment, or stigmatization could occur. Participant information is kept confidentially locked in a secured and password protected computer file. The usage of a pseudonym selected by the participant will be implemented. Activities beyond the scope of this research project also take place in the interview sites; you may be seen by other individuals that you know whom are not research participants.

\* Loss of your personal time is part of this research project. Each individual and group session will be limited to 1 1/2 hour to protect your time. You risk incurring transportation or parking costs associated with attending sessions. Public transportation tokens or parking

reimbursement if applicable will be offered at each session to alleviate this concern.

How will I benefit from the study?

\* There is no benefit to you. However, your participation could help us understand preventative treatment for conditions stemming from LGBT+ social isolation including suicide, depression, substance usage, or unprotected sexual practices which can benefit you indirectly. In the future, this may help other people to decrease thoughts of suicidal ideation and not to commit suicide.

What other choices do I have?

\*Your alternative to being in the study is to not be in the study.

What happens if I do not choose to join the research study?

\*You may choose to join the study or you may choose not to join the study. Your participation is voluntary. There is no penalty if you choose not to join the research study. You will lose no benefits or advantages that are now coming to you, or would come to you in the future.

When is the study over? Can I leave the study before it ends?

\* The study is expected to end after all participants have completed all interviews and all the information has been collected. The study may be stopped without your consent for the following reasons:

o The PI feels it is best for your safety and/or health-you will be informed of the reasons why.

- o You have not followed the study instructions
- o The PI, the sponsor or the Office of Regulatory Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania can stop the study anytime

You have the right to drop out of the research study at anytime during your participation. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decide to do so. Withdrawal will not interfere with your future care.

If you no longer wish to be in the research study, please contact Jeffrey Jin, at 856-298-0589 and take the following steps:

How will confidentiality be maintained and my privacy be protected?

\* Participant information is kept locked in a secured and password protected computer file. The LSW is bound by HIPAA guidelines and will maintain confidentiality in individual interview sessions. You will be asked to select a pseudonym to be used in the publication of the collected interviews. If you do not wish to choose a pseudonym, one will be randomly assigned by the interviewer.

The researcher and project staff will have access to participant information. In addition the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Pennsylvania will have access to these records if needed.

What happens if I am injured from being in the study?

\* We will offer you the social work support or referral service if needed to treat injuries directly resulting from taking part in this research. Services provided by the social work interview will not be billed. If you

receive mental health care externally, you may also be responsible for outside services.

There are no plans for the University of Pennsylvania to pay you or give you other compensation for the injury. You do not give up your legal rights by signing this form. If you think you have been injured as a result of taking part in this research study, tell the person in charge of the research study as soon as possible. The researcher's name and phone number are listed in the consent form.

Will I have to pay for anything?

- \* There is no cost to participate in this study.
- \* Public transportation or parking a vehicle may incur costs in order to attend his study. SEPTA tokens and parking reimbursement will be offered at each interview.

Will I be paid for being in this study?

- \* Study participants will be paid \$10 for each interview in the form of a gift card.

Please note: In order to be compensated for your participation in this study, you must provide your Social Security Number. Additionally, please note that the University of Pennsylvania is required to report to the IRS any cumulative payments for participation in research studies that exceed a total of \$600 in a calendar year.

Who can I call with questions, complaints or if I'm concerned about my rights as a research subject?

- \* If you have questions, concerns or complaints regarding your participation in this research study or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you should speak with the Principal



Investigator listed on page one of this form. If a member of the research team cannot be reached or you want to talk to someone other than those working on the study, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs with any question, concerns or complaints at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 898-2614.

When you review this document, you are agreeing to take part in this research study. If you have any questions or there is something you do not understand, please ask. You will receive a copy of this consent document.

---

Date

Appendix 3: Full I-poems (David)

I Poem                  David

*I got bullied*

*I came out*

*I came out*

*I was bi*

*I turned 18*

*I realized*

*I was like*

*I'm pretty sure*

*I'm supposed to be trans*

*I looked*

*I got*

*I'm a lot happier*

*I try*

*I'm scared*

*I don't*

*I always have*

*I'm afraid*

*I'm trans*

*I don't think*

*I first came out*

*I already knew*

*I was like okay*

*I came out trans*

*I was*

*I was*

*I talked*

*I was*

*I shouldn't*

*I'm very concerned*

*I came out as lesbian*

*I came out as trans*

*I didn't*

*I thought*

*I was*

*I found out*

*I was*

*I was*

*I was*

*I was*

*I did have*

*I was alone*

*I guess*

*I would say*

*I left*

*I didn't' want to go*

*I would tell*

*I knew*

*I knew her*

*I had a crush on her*

*I knew*

*I was chilling*

*I got older*

*I finally*

*I need*

*I mean*

*I don't*

*I'm pretty much all over*

*I think*

*I'm kind of*

*I'm*

*I helped*

*I told*

*I just recently*

*I know*

*I grew up*

*I like*

*I didn't know*

*I liked females*

*I had*

*I was like okay*

*I was like*

*I figured*

*I liked women*

*I've had*

*I was*

*I love pets*

*I don't know*

*I've always liked*

*I don't really know*

*I guess*

*I was*

*I always had*

*I had*

*I got older*

*I was like*

*I had*

*I remember*

*I would always*

*I think*

*I bond more*

*I just wind up*

*I can't talk*

*I'll grab my cat*

*I just feel better*

*I'm meeting somebody*

*I'll pet*

*I'm talking*

*I get nervous*

*I have*

*I think*

*I have*

*I'm helping*

*I've always looked at it*

*I had brought over*

*I had*

*I mean*

*I was*

*I pick him up*

*I'll just sit there*

*I'll just petting him*

*I'll turn*

*I'm like yup*

*I know*

*I don't see*

*I have a date*

*I'll talk to the cat*

*I look good or something*

*I'm like okay*

*I can do this*

*I have to change*

*I probably look horrible*

*I have one*

*I've been*

*I moved here*

*I think*

*I think*

*I'd rather always*

*I'd rather not be*

*I'd rather have*

*I know*

*I actually try*

*I'll fact check*

*I probably wouldn't have said*

*I try*

*I'm more open*

*I'm not like open*

*I think*

*I talk to my animals*

*I think*

*I'm trying*

*I was*

*I wanted*

*I have to*

*I have*

*I want to do*

*I'm not even sure*

*I want to*

*I came out*

*I've been holding and petting a lot of my animals*

*I'm always nervous*

*I go straight to my cats*

*I go to my cats*

*I haven't gotten*

*I pass most of the time as just a male*

*I don't think*

*I have*

*I'm looking*

*I'm still a male*

*I mean*

*I was probably*

*I am now*

*I'm just like oh okay*

*I just think*

*I can't say okay*

*I don't feel*

*I feel*

*I said*

*I see*

*I mainly see*



Appendix 4. Full I- Poem (Molly)

I Poem                      Molly

*I think*

*I was like*

*I was like kind of like flirting*

*I remember feeling*

*I don't understand that*

*I was questioning*

*I just kind of stopped*

*I think*

*I was kind of*

*I still think*

*I think*

*I'm straight*

*I think*

*I got to school*

*I had*

*I was like oh my God*

*I was*

*I'm like*

*I just want to be her*

*I still think like*

*I was like*

*I'm straight*

*I just think*

*I guess*

*I still prefer guys*

*I hadn't had*

*I was just kind of*

*I also find*

*I'm not*

*I was just kind of*

*I went up*

*I really like this girl*

*I haven't done*

*I don't understand*

*I don't know why*

*I*

*I was like*

*I don't know*

*I didn't think that was me*

*I didn't think*

*I just kind of ignored it*

*I was like*

*I think*

*I was*

*I told*

*I still love you*

*I came back*

*I don't think*

*I said*

*I was*

*I'm going to*

*I went*

*I was just like oh*

*I'm dating a girl*

*I think*

*I don't care*

*I was planning*

*I was going*

*I still identified*

*I was attracted*

*I knew*

*I have*

*I think*

*I don't think*

*I told them directly*

*I think*

*I think*

*I don't really care*

*I don't care*

*I had tried*

*I knew*

*I was coming back*

*I have something to say*

*I've been dating a girl*

*I'm gay*

*I came out to her*

*I guess*

*I did it*

*I was just like*

*I'm dating a girl*

*I didn't know*

*I think*

*I don't even know*

*I was like no*

*I'm not*

*I'll say*

*I think*

*I went*

*I think*

*I don't think*

*I can recall*

*I think*

*I feel like*

*I identify*

*I think*

*I don't think*

*I had*

*I think*

*I would be*

*I guess the Penn hookup culture*

*I was like having*

*I want to*

*I went*

*I met*

*I started out*

*I had like*

*I was distraught*

*I think*

*I think*

*I had to pick one or the other*

*I picked*

*I was in love with this hamster*

*I know of*

*I got*

*I would go through*

*I was like*

*I guess*

*I talked to*

*I think*

*I think it more*

*I was upset*

*I would lock*

*I would lock*

*I definitely*

*I still talk*

*I don't go home often*

*I do*

*I give*

*I'll take her*

*I'll take her*

*I have to say*

*I kind of explained*

*I made sure*

*I came to*

*I guess*

*I was younger*

*I feel upset*

*I know*

*I guess*

*I'll still do it*

*I'll say something*

*I'm go to say*

*I think*

*I took the dog*

*I'm dating a girl*

*I actually have*

*I meet*

*I love my dog*

*I think*

*I'm more comfortable*

*I am*

*I'd rather stay home*

*I'm an animal person*

*I'm looking to go*

*I just don't really like*

*I don't like*

*I get so much*

*I think*

*I try*

*I would like to say*

*I do think*

*I want*

*I don't*

*I don't think*

*I don't do well*

*I don't think so*

*I think now*

*I have a cat and*

*I see them*

*I think*

*I can talk*

*I love them*

*I think*

*I can talk*

*I guess*

*I really don't go*

*I don't see her as much*

*I'd like to*

*I guess*

*I feel more*

*I*

*I know*

*I never*

*I'm the animal person*

*I have*

*I've lost*

*I was really close*

*I lived with them*

*I can't stand them anymore*

*I would have said*

*I can't talk to her anymore*

*I was trying*

*I never speak*

*I never speak to her*

*I would have said she was my best friend*

*I lost*



*I think*

*I am my own person*

*I think*

*I would stand up*

*I'm like*

*I'm just defending myself*

*I'm realizing this*

*I'm just not*

*I'm like*

*I'm like really?*

*I have two*

*I talk to them*

*I like the snakes the most*

*I don't really talke*

*I think the cat*

*I understand*

*I get close*

*I come home*

*I'm sad*

*I was*

*I took*

*I want him back*

*I just took him home*

*I apologized later*

*I took him*

*I wanted him*

*I was feeling bad*

*I still get*

*I think back*

*I think*

*I now*

*I get*

*I've done*

*I've spent*

*I have*

*I'm an adult*

*I can do what*

*I want*

*I'm not going*

*I'm going*

*I include*

*I say my family*

*I think*

*I was always like yeah*

*I'm going to be*

*I was like no*

*I don't want to*

*I came here*

*I got a job*

*I was like oh maybe*

*I would like to do it*

*I think*

*I've always*

*I feel*

*I'm going*

*I can understand*

*I know*

*I'm like oh*

*I want*

Appendix 5. Word Cloud of Codes



Appendix 6. Interview Guide

**Interview Guide**

- What was your experience like as an LGBT+ youth growing into an adult?
  - Tell me about your experience regarding sexual development in your youth?
    - o Are you currently out?
    - o When did you first realize that you were LGBT+? Tell me about that experience.
    - o If so, at what age? Was coming out in stages for you? If not, what are the reasons that you are not out?
    - o What was it like coming out to your family? How did they react?
    - o If not out, how do you feel they would react?
    - o What was it like coming out to your friends? What was their reaction?
    - o If not out, how do you feel that they would react?
    - o Tell me about your experiences with heterosexism? How did this affect how you saw yourself as an LGBT+ youth?
- As a sexually developing youth, what was your social support system like?
  - o How would you describe your support system?

- o Tell me about your school? family? church? friends?
  - o Did you have siblings? Or other relatives close in age to you? Were they older/ younger than you? What was your relationship like with them?
  - o Who was in your support system? How out were you to them?
  - o Was there a person that you were able to confide in? Tell me about them.
  - o Was there a person who surprisingly rejected you in time of need? Tell me about them.
  - o In what ways did you find to learn more about your sexuality?
  - o Did you talk about your sexual identity or orientation with anyone? What was that like for you?
- 
- What has your experience been like with pets?
    - o Did you have pets in your own household? Or were they in another location or person's home?
    - o What pets did you have?
    - o What are your first memories of a pet?
    - o Was there one or a few that you felt particularly close with? Tell me more.
    - o Did you talk to your pets? What kinds of things did you tell them?

- o Did you consider your pet to be your friend? Why or why not?
  - o During adolescence or sexual development, did your relationship with pets change? Tell me about your pets during this period.
  - o Did you hold or your cuddle your pet if you were upset? Tell me about those times.
  - o Did your pets influence the way you saw yourself? Tell me more.
  - o How did pets affect your relationships with other people?
  - o What feelings did you have about feeding, grooming, or walking your pet?  
Did this affect your sense of importance?
  - o Do you have pets now? If so, tell me about them.
- 
- How did your experiences with animals as an LGBT+ youth affect you now as a young adult?
    - Presently, do you have people that are a support for you? pets? Tell me about them?
    - Do you talk to pets now? What kinds of things do you say to them?
    - Do you find comfort in physically having a pet? In what way?
    - As an adult, are you able to discuss your LGBT+ status with other people?
    - Has your ability to talk about your sexuality with other people changed since the time you were an adolescent? If yes, in what ways? If not, why do you think that is?

- Did having pets in your youth affect your current self esteem? Did having pets affect your current academic or career path? Tell me more.



Appendix 7. Companion Animal Genograms for Each Interview

Participant name is listed in ALL CAPS

Under their name is the companion animal with the animal's name if given, species/breed as specified, and if the animal belonged to someone else.

KEY

<b>BOLD= closest relationship</b>
<i>ITALIC= deceased</i>
REGULAR=unspecified

1. SARA KATHERINE

*Vador= dog (Greyhound) deceased*  
*Lucky = dog (Greyhound) deceased*  
*Zoey = dog (Husky/Lab mix) deceased*  
**Maggie= dog (English Shepard mix) alive**  
**Mohawk=guinea pig alive**

2. KERI

**Mr. Seward = dog (Dauschund/Yorkie mix) alive**  
***Hayley = dog (Lab/Greyhound/Whippet mix) deceased***  
 Brassie = dog belonging to her mother alive  
*Hans = deceased*  
*Unnamed hamsters = deceased*

3. JAMES

***Venus= dog (Pitbull mix) deceased***  
**Jeffrey = dog alive**  
**Dixie = dog (Boxer/Pitbull mix) alive**  
*Unnamed dogs (Great Dane & Dauschund) deceased*

4. ALEX

***Farley = dog (Australian Shepard) deceased***  
 Unnamed cat (Ragdoll) alive  
*Unnamed farm animals deceased & alive*

*Chickens*

*Ducks*

*Horses*

*Goats*

*Sheep*

*Cattle*

*Pigs*

*Rabbits*

*Dogs*

*Cats*

5. DAVID

**McGee = cat                      alive**  
Unnamed friend's cat in household                      alive  
*Unnamed Cats                      deceased*  
*Dogs                      deceased*  
*Birds                      deceased*  
*Fish                      deceased*

6. MOLLY

**Molly Smiles = dog (Australian Labradoodle) alive**  
***Bailey = dog (Pub/Beagle mix)                      deceased***  
*Unnamed Goldfish                      deceased*  
*Blue = Beta Fish                      deceased*  
***Cinnamon = Chinese Dwarf Hamster                      deceased***  
*Sparky = hamster                      deceased*  
*Turtley = turtle belonging to brother                      deceased*

7. NATALIE

**Rex = dog (Bichon)                      alive**  
***Snickers = dog                      deceased***  
***Rocky = canary                      deceased***  
*Unnamed Turtles                      deceased*  
*Hermit Crabs deceased*  
***Guinea Pigs                      deceased***  
Buttercup = cat belonging to friend                      alive

8. JAY

Sparky = dog (Westy)                      alive

**Cherry = dog (Cocker Spaniel)                      alive**  
*Unnamed Guinea Pigs                      deceased*  
*Fish                      deceased*  
*Neighbors dog (Yellow Labrador Retriever) deceased?*

9. MATHEW

**Shira = dog (German Shepard/ Lab mix)                      deceased**  
*Pepper = neighbor's dog (Dalmation)                      deceased*  
*Unnamed Puppy in household                      alive*

10. CYNTHIA

**Dakota = dog (Golden Retriever)                      alive**  
**Molly = dog (Schnauzer)                      alive**  
*Brandy = dog                      deceased*  
*Katie = dog                      deceased*  
*Unnamed Fish                      deceased*  
*Hermit Crabs deceased*

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